



2020 RecycleMania Case Study

University of Ottawa: Waste reduction through the Free Store

1. Contact info

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2. Focus of Case study

The free store is a storefront used by the uOttawa community to reduce waste and foster a culture of reuse and repurposing.

3. Detailed description of campaign component:

In 2005, the University of Ottawa's Housing Services had a problem with waste. Every spring and fall, when students moved out, large dumpsters were filled with valuable and reusable items. These items would end up in the landfill instead of going to budget conscious students who gladly take them.

Rather than dumpster diving for salvageable items, students thought there may be a more conventional way to salvage these goods. They set up an event where others could take items free of charge. Interest in the events increased until they were so popular it became an issue. That's where the idea of a Free Store (or La Gratuiterie) arose. A permanent location where every single item was completely free. Students worked with the Office of Campus Sustainability to bring this concept to life.

Today, the Free Store is a space on campus run by a largely volunteer driven workforce that collects and redistributes items otherwise unwanted by the uOttawa community. The store is open three times a week and redistributes donated items such as:

- Clothing (all types, shoes hats, costumes)
- Kitchenware (from spoons to a minifridge, but not large appliances or furniture)
- Household items
- Books and school supplies
- Body products
- Electronics

Essentially, anything but food and furniture is accepted and redistributed (other campus services collect these). Anyone can donate, but uOttawa students, staff and alumni are the ones who can come into the store and take whatever and however much they need. The Free Store is partnered with groups on campus such as student life, housing, and food services to ensure that undesired items are brought to the Free Store rather than be disposed of. Excess amounts are donated to other organizations in Ottawa like homeless shelters and community organizations.

4. Planning steps & timeline to implement:

- 2006- Pop up free store event
- 2007– Students and the Office of Campus Sustainability start collecting it and storing it for the fall
- 2008- Fall Orientation week pop-up store
- 2009- Pop up store becomes a monthly event in the University Centre.
- 2011- The event grows becoming too popular and overcrowded.
- 2011-2012- Sustainability Office applies for a permanent space. An old house on the edge of campus is allocated. Although the store was popular, the space was inaccessible, cramped, and had problems with break-ins.
- 2016- A commercial donation bin is purchased and branded.
- 2018- The Free store moves to a new central space on campus that is bright, clean, and accessible. Visits continue to increase as the store is more visible and better organized. Volunteers and/or employees are recruited through community service learning opportunities and partnerships with campus groups.

The Free Store has been operating in some form for over ten years. It has gone through quite the transformation with constant developments, networking and improvements being made over time.

5. Resources and stakeholders involved

The Free Store is run by the Office of Campus Sustainability and its members. In the store itself, two student employees are funded by the university so that at least one is always on site during operating hours. Of course, several volunteers are involved to ensure the store functions properly. We have partnered with the university's Centre for Global and Community Engagement so that positions for volunteering at the Free Store are posted and can be used for class credit in some cases. This semester 75 volunteers helped us out.

University employees can also donate any surplus items through intramail or transport services to the Free Store. Promotional materials from a conference or office supplies that would otherwise get thrown away is repurposed here.

Another major partner is the International Students Office, as we identified early on that international students were major beneficient of the store. We worked with the office to offer an event just for international students which has become a popular regular event.

Costs/Budget

Due to the nature of the store, some costs are covered using donations. If hangers or laundry detergent are donated, they will most likely be used for store operations. In general, the major expenses for a Free Store are the physical space rental, (including for storage), utilities, waste removal, and cleaning costs. Otherwise, a major expense is the labour needed to run the store.

Because we have located the service within the Office of Campus Sustainability, which is in the Facilities department, the costs for the space and storage area, utilities, cleaning, and waste services are paid for by the University.

As for labour, the Free Store is managed with the support of two members of the Office of Campus Sustainability. Our office then hires 2 coordinators for the fall and winter semesters (15 hours per week) who become full time in the summer to run the store. Students are hired through Financial Aid. We also create over 30 volunteer placements each semester through our Centre for Global and Community Engagement for weekly shifts in the store. These volunteer placements were essential in ensuring the store could operate.

Other miscellaneous costs have been covered mostly by donations, financing, or fundraisers. In order to acquire furniture and a laundry machine, we have sought financing from the Facilities Service and from donations. We acquired two carts on wheels (for picking up donations) from facilities. We also purchased a metal commercial donation bin branded with our logo for around \$800. (in the past we used a large shipping crate fitted with a lid). Facilities paid for the donation bin to make the area for donations cleaner and safer.

We also have fundraisers which bring in enough money to cover the costs of laundry soap throughout the year. During campus move out, our peak time, we spend about \$600 on laundry in the Residences.

Fundraisers:

(These happen mostly after the collection from campus move out week)

Selling textbooks to bookstore

Taking high quality clothing to a consignment store

Selling new or high value items on Kijiji (We also keep some for contests as part of our communications)

6. Describe the Results of this campaign component

a. General results

Over time the Freestore has gotten a lot of attention from the people on campus and internationally

For one, the free store has been featured in the university Newspaper, *The Gazette*, multiple times throughout the years. Here are a few examples of the articles published about us:

Give and get: <https://bit.ly/2X59636>

I wish I'd known: <https://bit.ly/3cbv3Ch>

Our independent student newspaper, *Fulcrum* has written about it :

<https://thefulcrum.ca/news/free-store-opens-new-location-start-year/>

It's also been featured in a segment on the national news Radio Canada in the show *Tous include* (French program): <https://bit.ly/2TTisxb>

On campus, the free stores events are so popular that they're posted on the events page of the university's website for all its students to see: <https://welcome.uottawa.ca/events/pop-up-free-store>

Other results come from the students, staff and alumni of uOttawa who have gotten into the habit of checking the Free Store for things they need rather than buying new. Similarly, volunteers become exposed to the idea of waste reduction and learn about campus sustainability efforts. Many groups on campus, such as Community Protection, Alumni Services and the student union, have rerouted their unused stuff to send it to the Free Store instead. Fewer things are sent to landfills and we help the campus reduce its overall waste production. Finally, our Free Store has become an important part of the international student community. In fact, several international students have started Free Stores in other countries, including France and Hong Kong. We believe this improves our reputation as a University by creating a unique service to support students who are new to Canada.

b. Specific measurable impact figures, if applicable.

In the winter semester of 2020, 40 Free Store volunteers gave 395 hours of their time to collect, sort, clean and redistribute 4.14 tonnes of used items. We received 2706 visits to the store during that time.

The total waste diverted since the first Free Store event is 158 tonnes. That's more than the weight of an entire house! This equates to 158 tonnes of new materials not mined or manufactured or transported.

This chart illustrates the total tonnage that was redistributed by the free store over its 10 years (including the “Dump and Run” event which is the name of the donation collection program when students move out of residences).



A 2017-2018 student report found the Free Store had a Value of \$1.5million in products. Students also calculated that the service had a social return on investment of 17 to 1, meaning that every dollar spent to operate the store is worth \$17 of goods provided to the campus community.

Different campus groups, including employees, now seek us for certain items, for example binders or charging cords. Arts classes ask for materials to create their works and theatre groups look for costume and set pieces. These are the building blocks of a circular economy on campus, getting us one step closer to Zero Waste.

We also support local organizations by donating goods to them. In 2017, for example, we donated 1,568 kg to local charities and shelters.

This of course, is only possible thanks to the thousands of student’s volunteer hours. We could not get by without the help of our volunteers.

7. What would you do differently in the future?

Looking back, we had a hard time controlling the quantities of materials we received donations. The store was frequently overstocked with stuff and we couldn’t get rid of it fast enough. If we had planned from the beginning to incorporate proper storage areas with an organised system to give away items when the store was overstocked, we could have moved materials more efficiently through the system. A tidy store attracts a broader audience and makes it easier for people to find what they need.

At first, our Store was open to the public. We accepted donations on a busy street and got quite a lot of donations from the surrounding neighborhood. We also allowed external community members to use the store. However, this caused several problems and safety concerns. We had break-ins to both the store and the donation bin.

We didn't have the capacity to control the flow of goods and people. Entry to the Free Store is now restricted to the campus community, and the donation bin has been moved inside a campus building. We have also developed a targeted approach to giving donations back to the community, focusing on items that local organizations need.

8. What advice would you give to another college that wanted to do a similar effort?

Be patient and persistent! The Free store on campus took a long time to get to where it is today but the result was worth the work. There are some things that can be done to facilitate the creation of a store, however.

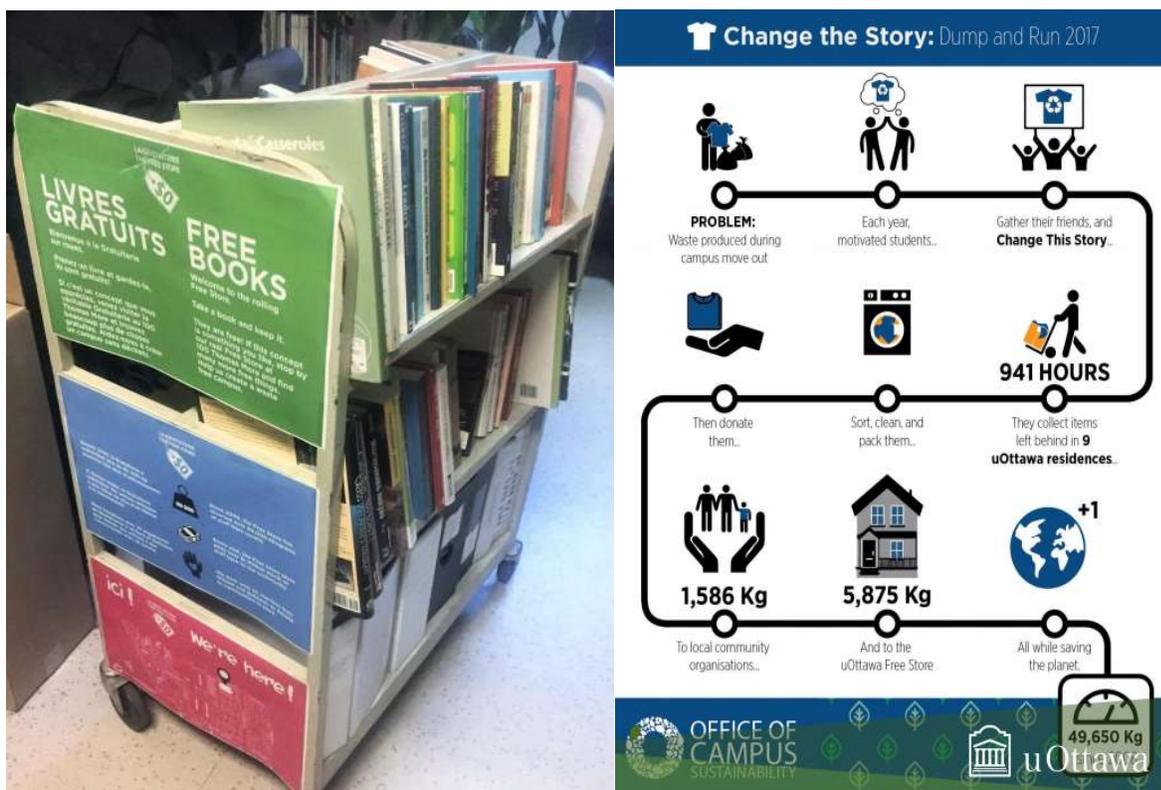
1. Negotiating for space (storage and retail) needs university support. It's best to identify an employee or office which can support and oversee the program in order to ensure adequate resources. Also, try to obtain a permanent area and make donations simple.
2. Conveying the environmental and economic benefits of the Free Store to the university community is important to ensure people are interested and want to see the Store it continues operating. Make it part of your campus waste diversion goals. Emphasize how it helps both students & employees and make it welcoming to both.
3. Volunteers are essential. They are not only useful for the store, but it is a great experience for getting people involved in environmental initiatives. Most start without that in mind but develop an understanding of the volume and impact of waste during their time volunteering.
4. If you want to attract a broad clientele on campus, the items should be well organized, displayed, and clean. Having lots of storage space really helps keep the store tidy. Every so often it is good to do a total clean out and start stocking new items.

Overall, this takes time. Start with a few events and grow over time. Be persistent. Do not give up and don't forget the end goal will be diverting thousands of items from landfills, overall helping the community, the school, and the planet.

9. Photos and Graphics



Our lovely volunteers sorting through donated items.



The roaming free school supplies cart coupled with an infographic on the *Dump and Run* event hosted each year by the Free Store.



The new Free Store location on campus



The famous Free Fair event hosted during the 101 week by the Free store.

**photos taken by Jonathan Rausseo*