



2024 Campus Race to Zero Waste Case Study

Waste Diversion Category

A Novel Idea: Tackling Book Waste

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Focus of Case study:

Creating and implementing a campus centric, closed loop approach towards keeping books in circulation within the campus ecosystem

Detailed description of campaign or effort:

Every year at Move Out thousands of books get donated or left behind. Sadly, many of these books get recycled or landfilled. Although there are a number of organizations / charities that will take books, most are less interested in receiving textbooks / academic texts. Furthermore, many of these organizations are not local, and so getting books, which are heavy and bulky, to these organizations requires effort and expense, and generates emissions as they are shipped all over the world in many cases. The fate of the books also is somewhat uncertain.

At Amherst College we have taken a more local, campus centric approach towards keeping books within the campus ecosystem. We have a coordinated collection, sorting, and redistribution program that closes the book loop.

We set up designated drop spots within all of the residence halls during the Move Out Period to collect books. The books are amassed and curated by a student fellow from the Office of Sustainability over the summer, and separated into three categories: (1) textbooks, (2) academic texts, and (3) leisure reads.

Students run an on-campus consignment used bookstore "The Option" out of the basement of one of the residence halls where students can sell their textbooks to other students, typically at a heavily discounted rate. The Option has over 18,000 textbooks on hand available for student purchase, and has become the go to for students looking for affordable texts. We donate any textbooks that we receive during the Move Out Process to The Option, and allow them to use the funds gathered from the sale of those books to help fund their store operations.

We have set up a series of free book shelves in the college's main library to make available, to the campus community, all of the academic texts (so not standard textbooks like an Intro Chemistry Text, but other texts likely used in classes).

We have established Free Little Libraries in all of the first-year residence halls to share back all of the leisure reads gathered.

By keeping books on campus, we not only reduce the number of books sent off campus, or worse to the landfill or recycling bins, but also hopefully facilitate the availability and accessibility of used books and thereby reduce the continual purchase and stream of often unnecessary new books into the system. The programs have been very popular and to date very successful.

Planning steps & timeline to implement:

- About two weeks prior to Move Out, the Office of Sustainability partners with the Office of Residential Engagement and Wellbeing to message students about minimizing waste during Move Out and donating any items, like books, that they don't intend to store or take with them.
- Donation bags and stickers are distributed to all residence hall rooms by the custodial staff the week before move out for students to collect and label their donations.
- In each residence hall first floor common area, a specified drop zone marked with a "Donations" banner is designated where students are instructed to drop any donations including their books.
- As donations accumulate in the drop zones, the Facilities team pick up and amass all of the donations in the college's ice rink for sorting and summer storage. The ice rink is not utilized during the summer, and the Athletics Department allows us to use it and collect all of the donations in one place.
- The Office of Sustainability hires a student for the summer to curate and sort all of the donations.
- We amass literally thousands of books. The books are sorted into one of three categories (textbooks, academic texts, and leisure reads).
- The textbooks are given to The Option to be inventoried, cataloged, and priced to be ready for Fall Classes.
- The academic texts are placed in the free shelves at the campus main library. Any excess books that don't fit in the shelves are stored in the Office of Sustainability and are used to replenish the stocks as the free shelves empty out over the course of the year.
- The leisure reads are distributed across the free little libraries in the seven first-year residence halls. The little libraries are located in the first floor common spaces and consist of salvaged bookshelves from the college's surplus warehouse.
- The Option has existed for decades. Adding the free shelves in the main library and free little libraries was quick and easy to implement.

Resources and stakeholders involved:

Creating this closed loop campus book system has been a collaborative endeavor among numerous offices and stakeholders on campus including the college's Office of Sustainability, the Campus Library System, the Office of Residential Engagement and Wellbeing, the Housing and Operations Team, the Student Consignment Bookstore, and the Facilities waste team.

The cost and resources to develop and implement this project have been relatively minimal. The Office of Sustainability hires a student over the summer to handle all of the donations collected during Move Out (including the books). This student gathers and sorts the books into the three categories, and then distributes the books, depending on type, to the Option, Main Library, or Little Libraries by the end of the summer.

The library had an empty set of bookcases that we set up on the main floor next to the library café with a sign that says "Free Books". The bookcases for the free little libraries we taken from the college's surplus warehouse of used furniture, and so were in essence free. As such, the costs to implement these components was nominal.

Describe the Results of this campaign component:

In our first year of the project we have successfully been able to redistribute an estimated 1,000+ books across campus. Prior to the development of this program, the majority of these books sadly went to the landfill or if lucky were recycled. It was literally tons of books being wasted. This closed loop, campus centric approach has allowed us to keep these books in circulation, and we believe has helped reduce the number of new books being purchased with these used books readily available. The programs have been quite popular given the number of books we have been able to successfully redistribute.

What would you do differently in the future?

This first year we have learned a lot that will shape efforts moving forward:

- (1) In the current Move Out collection system, books are mixed in with other donations, and as such need to be sorted out from among the room décor and clothing items. To help make the sorting easier, we might set up designated book drops / bins within the donation drop zones.
- (2) A new campus textbook program threatens to make "The Option" obsolete. The college decided this coming year to include the cost of course textbooks and materials in the comprehensive fee in an effort to ensure that the cost of course materials is never a barrier to taking a class. Although this helps ensure equity and access to the course offerings, it does make the resale of used textbooks by the student consignment shop obsolete as students will no longer be buying their own books since they will now be provided by the college at no cost to the student. The future of The Option and fate of the 18,000 textbooks they have in their inventory is yet to be decided. Moving forward, students (and the Office of Sustainability) will be able to sell textbooks back to the campus bookseller (Follette) for money, and so there will still be a mechanism to keep used textbooks in the campus ecosystem.

- (3) We have approached a few departments that teach large introductory classes using a standard textbook (e.g., Intro Chemistry, Biology, Psychology) about considering the high school model of distribution in which the department would lend students a copy of the text for the semester, and the student would then return the text at the end of the semester so it could be reused by the next class. This could reduce the continual purchase of new textbooks every semester by the next set of students and hopefully reduce the sheer number of texts in circulation and ending up in the donation / waste stream.
- (4) We have started encouraging faculty to think about what a paperless classroom might entail, and the possibility of moving their readings and texts to digital versions when feasible. The college already uses an online digital course platform, Moodle, that makes it easy to share digital materials with students in the class. This could help reduce the amount of hardcopy materials in circulation and subsequently landfilled.
- (5) This coming year we hope to take a more accurate count of the number of books we are receiving and redistributing. This first year we focused on the mechanics and logistics of getting the program set up that we didn't take a direct count of books handled, but a 1,000 is a fairly conservative estimate.
- (6) Hiring a dedicated summer student to sort all of the donated materials including the books allowed for us to amass, sort through, and redistribute the books before school started back in August.

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

Here is some advice for those interested in doing something similar:

- (1) For the project to work requires coordination among the Sustainability Office, Housing and Residence Life, Library, and Facilities.
- (2) Clear, consistent, and timely messaging to students about the book donation process is key to ensuring books don't get tossed.
- (3) Make it easy for students to donate. Having clearly marked donation drop spots within each residence hall allows for centralized collection of materials.
- (4) Storage of collected materials is always a challenge and limitation. Having access to a sizable space to amass, spread out, sort, and temporarily store the books is helpful.
- (5) Having a dedicated student or staff member to run point and coordinate the collection, sorting, and redistribution process allows for consistency, efficiency, and good organization and coordination.
- (6) You will need bookshelves to house the free little libraries and free books in the main library. You might check with your campus surplus / used furniture storage facility to see what is available.

Photos and Graphics:



We amass all of the books and then sort into the three different categories (textbooks, academic texts, and leisure reads). This is one of many full roller carts of books collected. (PC: Wes Dripps)



A series of Free Book Shelves in the Main Campus Library offer back the collected academic texts. These shelves are located in the Library Café making them visible, accessible, and easy to peruse while having a coffee or snack. (PC: Wes Dripps)



Free Little Libraries have been set up in each of the first-year residence halls and are filled with the collected leisure reads. Students can take and leave books as they wish. (PC: Wes Dripps)



“The Option” is a student run consignment textbook store that makes used textbooks available to students at a very affordable price. The shop is located in the basement of one of the residence halls on campus, and houses over 18,000 textbooks. (PC: Wes Dripps)