Solid Waste Reduction Outreach: Education and Awareness

Introduction:

The mission of Western Michigan University is built on three pillars: to be learner centered, discovery driven, and globally engaged (Mission and Vision). Included in WMU’s mission is a dedication to the pursuit of sustainability. However, many members of our community remain oblivious to the efforts of the university. With the constant inundation of information surrounding the WMU community, the Office for Sustainability is looking for ways to stand out. In the Solid Waste Reduction department, we continuously struggle with high rates of contamination with recyclable collection around campus. One of our goals is to improve student awareness and involvement with recycling. We would also like to see students embrace the attitude of reducing and reusing materials to minimize waste.

To achieve sustainability, we need support and cooperation from all students, faculty, and staff. Engaging students, faculty, and staff in the work that we do is crucial to WMU’s mission and strive toward sustainability. This semester, the Solid Waste Reduction team worked to expand our outreach to incoming students and members of the WMU community. By finding new opportunities to connect with and inform students, we hope to increase student responsiveness to campus sustainability.

Methods and Results:

Several options for engaging students were considered by the Solid Waste Reduction team. Producing a video, creating a required online module, updating and adding information to various WMU department websites, and working with transfer student materials were some of the ideas that were contemplated. Discussion of ideas and opportunities with different campus departments was a key part of this process.

Areas that we worked with included First Year Experience (FYE), Transfer Transition Program (TTP), and Parent and Family Programs. By collaborating with the TTP manager, we were able to develop a brief online sub-module for incoming transfer and graduate students. The sub-module will be included in the modules that the students are expected to complete. Through the online sub-module, we hope to increase student awareness of the waste reduction hierarchy (reduce, reuse, and recycle), and specifically, how to recycle on campus.

While meeting with the TTP manager, we learned about a monthly parent and family newsletter for members of WMU Family Connection. Because many parents (especially parents of new students) are very involved in their students’ lives, reaching out to WMU parents and family members may ultimately help us reach out to students. We theorize that parents are more likely to read and absorb information about reducing, reusing, and recycling because of their attention to detail and reduced exposure of WMU information (compared to students). We have worked with the director of Parent and Family Programs to publish information about the waste reduction hierarchy and campus recycling in an upcoming newsletter.
Pictured above is the solid waste reduction hierarchy that was included in the TTP online module and the recently published WMU Family Connection newsletter. This diagram depicts ideal and appropriate management of solid waste. Reduce, reuse, and recycle should be the first options before sending waste to a landfill or incinerating waste.

Commentary, Reflection, and Next Steps:

In the future, we would like to expand our outreach with the sub-module to include all incoming students. At the present time, the FYE director has declined to include the sub-module in the first-year student modules due to the existing volume of material that students are required to learn. A separate and expanded version of the sub-module would also be great for student outreach.

Regarding the Family Connection newsletter, we are planning to continue publishing periodic information about waste reduction, campus sustainability, and student opportunities at the Office for Sustainability. We also plan to publish information about student move-in week. Parents are often on campus helping their student during move-in, and their knowledge about how and where to dispose and recycle materials would be greatly beneficial.

Our next steps may include revisiting some of our ideas for student outreach, such as creating a short instructional video on the waste reduction hierarchy. Our communication with other WMU departments proved to be valuable, and we would like to continue contacting and working with various areas of campus. We were able to receive different perspectives, suggestions, and insight from each person we worked with, and this helped us come up with effective outreach techniques.

In conclusion, our experience with outreach this semester is that increased communication between WMU departments is beneficial to all. This gives us opportunities to collaborate on ideas and projects, as well as increase awareness and support for the Office for Sustainability.
References