

WMU SUSTAINABILITY CHANNEL CONCEPT

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Appropriate Technologies and Sustainability-The Campus as a Living Laboratory

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Executive Summary:

A WMU sustainability website was recently created, aiding in the Talloires Declaration goals of increasing sustainability awareness, education, and literacy; however, I hypothesized that not many campus members know about the sustainability website. I sought to find ways to increase the awareness of WMU's sustainability website, and therefore improve WMU's progress with the Talloires Declaration objectives. I chose to research the campus awareness of the sustainability website and the viability of adding a sustainability channel to the GoWMU portal as a medium for advertising campus sustainability information that would use little financial, environmental, and human resources; moreover, this medium would reach a broad demographic of the campus community.

Through networking with several gracious individuals, including Lisa Knutson, Thom Myers, Bruce Paananan, and Casey Barrons, many answers to my initial questions for sustainability channel investigation have been solved. During my research, I verified through the sustainability website's data compiler information that only 1% of WMU's demographic access the sustainability website each month and a rough survey estimate indicates at least a quarter of the website's activity is from individuals already knowledgeable of the sustainability website. I also determined that adding a sustainability channel will be a fairly simple way to advertise sustainability information to WMU's campus community with minimum required resources.

The sustainability channel design is not finished at the moment, but it should be finished by May 2009. The sustainability channel will include a link to the sustainability website, a link to the green guide, a 'determine your carbon footprint' link, an events calendar link, and a 'take the sustainability pledge' link¹, among other links still under discussion. Rotating pictures, a

¹ Casey Barrons is working on this project right now. When it is finished, we will include a link to her page.

colorful background in light green and brown links will make the channel stand out among other GoWMU channels, yet still look to be addressing environmental consciousness while tying in a little of WMU's colors.

Adding a sustainability channel to GoWMU's portal makes sense because every student accesses the portal to register for classes, check financial aid information, and check email. By advertising through this medium, we will be tapping an online resource already in use by campus members without requiring paper flyers or brochures. Once the sustainability channel is added, it will need little work to keep it maintained. This is also a very useful medium that may be tested for effectiveness by viewing the sustainability website's data compiler information proceeding the implementation of the sustainability channel.

Introduction:

By signing the Talloires Declaration, Western Michigan University commits to increase awareness of environmentally sustainable development, educate for environmentally responsible stewardship, and foster environmental literacy for all. A WMU sustainability website was established recently aiding in Talloires Declaration goals by making WMU sustainability information available online; however, like many other WMU websites, the WMU sustainability website is only reachable through direct searches for it, therefore limiting its exposure to individuals specifically looking for sustainability information. Occasionally a professor or student in the Environmental Studies department will direct students' attention to links that might be found on the WMU sustainability website, but the Environmental Studies demographic is small compared to the several thousand people associated with WMU; moreover, to improve awareness of sustainability in the campus community, all campus members should receive such

information. The advertisement of campus sustainability information to the WMU campus community is an area requiring improvement to strengthen the Talloires Declaration objectives.

Identifying sustainability awareness as an area to be improved, ways of doing so were contemplated. Ultimately, the medium to advertise sustainability information ought to be distributed across the entire campus community. Two ideas I had to advertise sustainability information to the larger campus community were to include sustainability information in the Western Herald, and to add a sustainability channel² to the GoWMU portal. Considering the limitations of individual interaction with the Western Herald, researching the option of adding a sustainability channel to the GoWMU portal was pursued. Not only would a sustainability channel be easily available to all WMU campus members, a sustainability channel would not require the additional use of paper necessary for advertising this information in the Western Herald.

By implementing a sustainability channel in the GoWMU portal, Western Michigan University will be bringing sustainability information to a web page nearly every student uses to register for classes, check email, and review financial aid information. Informal surveys indicate that occasionally students investigate some of the channel boxes in the GoWMU portal. Having sustainability information available to students when students do venture into looking at portal channels will greatly increase sustainability awareness with minimum financial, environmental, and human resources.

² Channels are the boxes with information and links in them that appear when one logs into the GoWMU portal.

Methodology and Data:

Determining what is required to get a new channel added to the GoWMU portal system initialized the momentum of this project. I approached Dr. Glasser with the question of whom I should contact to learn channel requirement information. Dr. Glasser sent out an inquiring email to Lisa Knutson, the sustainability website manager, which in turn went to Thom Myers, Director of Electronic Communications. Thom Myers emailed me shortly afterward with his contact information and said he would be happy to discuss channels with me. Thom Myers informed me that GoWMU portal channels should have a dedicated manager, regularly updated information, and interactive links rather than merely static links. Armed with finding answers to these tasks, I set out with more questions:

- Can I obtain data compiler information for the sustainability website to make a case that additional sustainability advertisement should be addressed?
- Who will manage the sustainability channel?
- Is it possible to have information “feeds” from another website into a GoWMU portal channel and therefore have updated sustainability events located in the channel?
- Are portal channels effective way to increase website activity with links located in the channels?

I began a running conversation through email with Lisa Knutson to find solutions. Because Lisa Knutson is already the manager of WMU’s sustainability website, it was rational to inquire whether or not she could accept the position of also managing the sustainability channel, and with permission from her supervisor, she graciously agreed to do this. Lisa Knutson also informed me of the limitations of how channel information can be programmed into the portal system. WMU does not have a content management system at this time, so information in portal

channels is usually brought in through in-line frames³. This process restricts the ease of updating channel information, and inhibits the initial idea of having upcoming sustainability events directly displayed in the channel.

Lisa Knutson also informed Dr. Glasser that it would be okay to forward sustainability website data compiler information to me. After reviewing data compiler information from the months of January, February, and March of 2009, I concluded that the sustainability website averages between 500-600 hits per month, but only approximately 250 visitors per month representing only 1% of WMU's campus population. I considered the 30 or so times I had visited the website in these two months, and hypothesized that many of the website hits are from students in ENVS 4100, the WMU Sustainability Committee, and other related departments. A rough estimate survey confirms at least 25% of the sustainability website activity is from campus members already active in the sustainability field. This hypothesis, however, is incomplete and may require additional exploration. Bearing in mind the almost no cost/maintenance of portal channels, we should still consider this argument strong enough to establish a sustainability channel. After the channel's implementation, further sustainability website data compiler information can be analyzed to determine whether adding a sustainability channel has increased website activity.

With initial questions answered, early March 2009 I began reviewing GoWMU portal channel designs to understand how information should be presented in a portal channel. I discovered most channels are designed with white backgrounds and simple black or blue links, but found a few channels with rotating pictures, colorful backgrounds, and colorful links. I was more interested in the colorful channels, as an initial observer, and so inquired with Thom Myers

³ In-line frames are ways of bringing html information from one website to another. A content management system allows direct feeds of information from a website to be displayed on another website.

if we might have freedom to use colors and pictures in the sustainability channel. Thom Myers informed me that color and pictures are okay within reasonable attractiveness. I asked ENVS 4100 classmates what colors they felt would be appropriate and the overall class consensus is the channel should have a light green background with brown links to blend a little of WMU's color palette in the design and to look like it's addressing environmental consciousness. The color design is still undergoing development at this moment, and should be done before May 2009.

Channel content was also an area to research for the design development. Casey Barrons, a former ENVS 4100 student and member of WMU's Sustainability Committee, and I met to discuss links to be included in the sustainability channel. I had planned on a link to the WMU's sustainability website, an event link, a green guide link, and perhaps an RSS news-feed. I explained to Casey that I must make a convincing argument to Thom Myers in order for the sustainability channel to appear on the main page, rather than buried in the channel guide⁴, of the GoWMU portal. Casey Barrons suggested, to make the channel more interactive, we might eventually add a link to a 'sustainability pledge' page, which is a project currently pursued by Casey. I further discussed content and design in a meeting with Lisa Knutson and Bruce Paananan on April 2, 2009. In this meeting we conversed the current state of affairs in the GoWMU portal world, and reviewed many of the portal channels. Lisa Knutson informed me that a calendar of events link from the sustainability website will be the easiest way right now to bring updated information to the channel. Bruce Paananan also enlightened me on a few applications available through GoWMU channels and online systems other universities have to organize events information.

⁴ The channel guide is an application on GoWMU portal's main page. Not many people, including myself before this project, know how to use the channel guide. Many channels that are located in the channel guide get little use due to the manual nature one must go about accessing them.

Examples of Best Practice on Campus:

Because creating awareness of sustainability through the GoWMU portal is new ground, no examples of best practice in this particular research area exist; however, several unrelated WMU services and affiliations have taken advantage of the GoWMU portal by advertising their activities through the use of channels. One of the more recent additions to the portal is the Center for Academic Support Programs (CASP) channel. I spoke briefly with Kim Ballard, Writing Center director who had a role in the CASP channel's beginnings, about the reasons why CASP chose to advertise through the GoWMU portal. Kim Ballard discussed a cost/benefit analysis for campus-wide advertisement of services by having information available to campus members in an online format. Portal channels are extremely undemanding forms of advertisement requiring few resources, but permitting large awareness benefits.

The Western Michigan University sustainability website currently has the most comprehensive collection of WMU campus sustainability information available to anyone visiting the site. More online interaction from Western Michigan University's campus community with the sustainability website would represent a best practice for campus sustainability awareness through online information.

Examples of Best Practice on Other Campuses:

Campuses all over the United States are taking advantage of the internet and creating websites dedicated to the awareness of sustainable practices. Because of the limitations of accessing internal information, such as what is available in the GoWMU portal, I was unable to discern if other campuses have sustainability channels. It is evident, though, that using the Internet is a key way to involve the campus community in sustainable activities and awareness.

One especially practical way the Internet has been used for several campuses to involve sustainable practices is through the implementation of traceable GPS systems on campus buses.

The “Magic Bus,” as it is referred to at the University of Michigan, can be located online at any given moment by U of M members interested in catching the bus. This program was implemented to improve rider experiences with the bus system, with goals of boosting rider attendance. Increasing the number of campus members commuting through bus services reduces automobile dependence and congestion on campus, and reduces campus greenhouse gas outputs. We might strive for such a service eventually at WMU to continue the goals of the Talloires Declaration. We might even consider having this application viewable through the sustainability channel.

Discussion:

Ultimately, it was decided that the sustainability channel would be a simple measure to increase campus community awareness and involvement in sustainable activities. Lisa Knutson will be the channel manager, and several links will be available in the sustainability channel, including a sustainability website link accessible by clicking on the WMU’s sustainability logo, a link to the green guide, a calendar of events link, a ‘determine your carbon footprint’ link, and a link to the future ‘sustainability pledge’ page. By having a colorful design incorporating rotating pictures, we hope to catch campus members’ attention when logged into the GoWMU portal. If and when a content management system is established, we also hope to provide direct information of upcoming campus sustainability events in the channel. Due to an already crowded main portal page, it is likely that the sustainability channel will either be located at the bottom of the page, or buried in the channel guide. Considering how important it is for Western

Michigan University to continue pursuing ways of satisfying the Talloires Declaration objectives, it would be reasonable to foster sustainability awareness by having the sustainability channel located closer to the top of the portal page or at least located on the main portal page.

Limitations of Analysis and Future Work:

Analysis of the sustainability channel is fairly finished. One may consider reviewing sustainability website data compiler information after the sustainability channel is implemented to track progress in promoting WMU's sustainability website activity. One may also consider adding additional useful information or links to the sustainability channel. A consideration brought to my attention while meeting with Lisa Knutson and Bruce Paananan, would be how we might include sustainability information in several unrelated channels. For instance, two channels that could be updated with sustainability information would be the 'where to eat' channel and the transportation channel. The 'where to eat' channel could include discount information regarding Ecomugs⁵, while the transportation channel might have a word blurb stating how riding the bus reduces greenhouse gases and is a more sustainable commuting choice. By no means, however, are these the only two channels that could have sustainability information included in them.

Conclusion/Recommendations:

Because it is likely the sustainability channel will be implemented very soon, I recommend only a review and additional involvement with the channel. Let people know the sustainability channel exists, increase awareness of online campus sustainability information, and

⁵ If and when Ecomugs are implemented. See other ENV5 4110 class projects.

look for ways we might improve sustainability awareness through online campus resources! I highly recommend a sustainable transportation application to be added eventually to the sustainability channel. A short-term research topic for future ENVS 4100 class projects is determining a Kalamazoo area safe bicycling route map and including a link to it in the sustainability channel. Another research topic as a long-term goal would be to determine costs/benefits of implementing an online GPS traceable bus system application that might be viewed through the sustainability channel. If the GPS bus application was viewable through the sustainability channel, it is likely that the channel would receive more use from the campus community.

This has been an exciting project to be involved with, and so much could not have been accomplished without the aid of all of the individuals I had to network with to get project questions answered.

References:

“All WMU Portal Channels” <http://gowmu.wmich.edu/>

Google Analytics Data Compiler Information for the WMU Sustainability Website

“WMU’s sustainability website” <http://wmich.edu/sustainability/>

“U of M Magic Bus – About Us” <http://mbus.pts.umich.edu/aboutus.php>

Appendix 1: Contact List

Name	Title/Relevance	Email
Casey Barrons	Member of the WMU Sustainability Advisory Committee	c.barrons@gmail.com
Kellee Campbell	Sustainability channel researcher	kellee.l.campbell@wmich.edu
Lisa Knutson	Director of Marketing and Creative Development-Auxiliary Enterprises	lisa.knutson@wmich.edu
Thom Myers	Director of Electronic Communication-Office of University Relations	thom.myers@wmich.edu
Bruce Paananen	GoWMU Administrator	gowmu-admin@wmich.edu

Appendix 2: Data Compiler Summary

Information Type	January 2009	February 2009	March 2009	Monthly Average
Website Visits	585	519	690	598
Unique Visitors	247	260	280	262
Traffic from Search Engines	72.48%	73.41%	73.04%	72.98%
Direct Traffic	18.80%	17.53%	14.78%	17.04%
% Pageviews for /sustainability/	11.24%	12.20%	18.79%	14.08%
Traffic Source: search (organic)	42.56%	35.84%	40.29%	39.56%
Traffic Source: google (organic)	23.93%	31.21%	24.06%	26.40%
Average Pageviews/Visit	4.08	3.33	3.23	3.55
Average Time on Site (min:sec)	5:17	2:57	3:19	3:51