Sustainable Offices

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1 Sustainable Departments

Williams is always working towards making the school more and more sustainable. From carbon emissions reduction goals to overhauling waste systems, the school has committed to sustainability goals. While the school is working towards broader and larger-scale goals, there are actions that every department can take to increase sustainability themselves! Through conversations with various faculty and staff, and working with the college’s Green Office program, here are some ideas about goals and future sustainability plans.

2 Green Office Program

The Green Office is a program through the Zilkha Center aiming to promote sustainable office practices.

2.1 How Does it Work?

Figure 1: Green Office

It is a voluntary program where offices can designate a liaison to work directly with Zilkha Center staff in promoting sustainability within their department. It’s like a sustainability tip line! First, the Zilkha Center presents information to the interested department, to see if they would like to join the program. Upon joining, a student intern is assigned to the department, and the department designates a liaison. The student intern and the department liaison work together alongside the Zilkha Center to engage staff, create solutions, and raise awareness.

2.2 Goals

The Office has multiple categories in which it works towards more sustainable goals. They are the following:

- Energy and Conservation
- Waste minimization
- Purchasing
- Meetings and Events
- Recycling
- Engagement
- Safe, Healthy, and Equitable Work Environment

2.3 Joining

If your department is interesting in becoming a partner with the Green Office program, please check out the document on how to launch the Green Office Program for you office! Also, check out the Green Office

\[\text{https://docs.google.com/document/d/1egfGUqRqWyeyhBnNfQ4djuvDr7xCtZdyKCMY_WnR6XE/edit}\]
3 Ideas and Initiatives

There are plenty of actionable items, ranging from smaller to larger scale, that would be a step forward in the process of creating sustainable offices. In this section, I will discuss some ideas, ranging from simple changes that can be implemented immediately, to larger scale projects that could be considered in the future. Special thanks to the Green Office, whose checklists contain great information that I borrowed from, and all the faculty and staff I spoke with.

3.1 Getting Started

Here is a short list of simple changes that can be made. For more information, and a more complete checklist, please consider working with the Green Office!

3.1.1 Energy and Conservation

- Turn off lights when leaving a room
- Unplug electronics, or use power saver mode
- Keep windows closed in extreme temperatures
- Use natural lighting whenever possible
- Take the stairs!
- Carpool, and try to avoid transport as much as possible, especially air travel
- Meet over video conferencing rather than travelling

3.1.2 Waste Reduction

- Have recycling bins available in all rooms and spaces
- Reuse materials – water bottles, office supplies, coffee makers
- Print double sided, and use recycled paper

3.1.3 Purchasing

- Purchase only recycled paper
- Eliminate single-use plastics
- No styrofoam!!!!!
- Purchase sustainably made furniture. In addition, see if furniture can be borrowed or bought from other departments. Office furniture can be found by emailing JoAnne Moran

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2https://sustainability.williams.edu/initiatives/green-office-program
3https://facilities.williams.edu/profile/jmoran3/
3.1.4 Meetings and Events

- Avoid printing meeting agendas and materials whenever possible
- Use virtual conferencing to reduce travel
- Provide sustainable foods, and make sure the trash and recycling policy is clearly explained

3.1.5 Safe, Healthy, and Equitable Work Environment

- Include pronouns during introductions
- Have house plants
- Promote volunteering
- Encourage participation in HR activities, and other campus-wide engagements

3.2 Larger-scale Projects

Through conversations with staff and other interns, I have compiled a list of larger-scale sustainability projects that I hope to see implemented in the future. Once some of the previous practices become embedded in the routine of each department, there are ways to more deeply embed sustainability into daily work. Below are a few ways to do this, though they will require department wide changes and decision making.

3.2.1 Virtual Events

The college is committed to reducing air travel, which has been one of the largest contributors to our carbon emissions. To accomplish this, moving towards having virtual events whenever possible is a great first step. Please check out the linked pdf to learn more about why virtual events are more sustainable, along with tips on how to host a successful virtual conference.

3.2.2 Waste Management and Reduction

There are several propositions for reducing and better managing waste on campus. Special thanks to Ken Morotomi ’23, who served as the Zero Waste Intern for the summer of 2020.

Centralized Purchasing, Surplus Management System

One huge cause of excess waste is the purchasing of items that are not needed, either because there are items that could be reused and recycled, or because another department or office has a surplus of these materials. By creating a combination of a centralized purchasing system and a surplus management system, Williams could greatly cut down on waste and unnecessary costs.

Currently, the libraries are planning to implement a trial of a centralized purchasing system, where staff members from different offices track items that have been purchased, as well as items that need to be bought, to see if items can either be bought in bulk, or shared between offices. I hope that if this proves successful, it may serve as a template for other departments, and a model of how to reduce our purchasing.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1uBRyDSC9sNLZ9ccT4zrNtW4zwnb10a3eV/view?usp=sharing
To keep things simple, I propose that departments could use an Excel or Google Sheets page, and list commonly-bought items, when they were last purchased, if they need to be purchased in the near future, or if anyone has a surplus. When an item is needed, staff members could first consult the sheet and see if anyone else has any additional items they could borrow. Also, when something is purchased, it could be logged onto the sheet with the date and the amount. The biggest challenge with this kind of system would be remembering to constantly check and update the sheet. However, even with partial implementation, it could reduce purchasing at very little time cost.

On a larger scale, a campus-wide centralized purchasing system, or a surplus management system, would be even better. By tracking which departments own which items, and funneling purchasing through a central figure who can buy in bulk and distribute accordingly, we could further reduce purchasing. In general, I would envision such a system only encompassing large purchases, such as furniture and appliances, and not minute details such as stationary, for simplicity’s sake, but if the program could be expanded to include all purchases, all the better.

Finally, please check out this guide on sustainable purchasing!⁵

Liquid Waste

Williams’ trash is hauled to the Wheelabrator Hudson Falls energy-from-waste facility in Hudson Falls, NY, where it is incinerated. The cost of our waste is determined by weight, and liquids, being incombustible, still factor into the cost. By separating liquid waste from solid waste, we could save thousands of dollars a year. In addition, custodians are often forced to “double-bag” waste to prevent leakage, and this could prevent that as well.

The University of Southern Maine started a similar project in 2013, and have found that over $2000 could be saved each year. For more information on this initiative, refer to the linked document.⁶

Thrift Store

For years, students have been looking for an on-campus store to buy clothes, supplies, and other small purchases. Having a student-run thrift store on campus would be a great way to exchange goods without needing to purchase online or travel to North Adams. Students would be able to sell items they no longer need, but could be useful for future students, at an affordable cost, which can both serve as additional income, and work to reduce the environmental impact of buying new items.

I would propose a system where students could bring items they want to sell, and have them displayed in a central location on campus. Upstairs Paresky could be an interesting choice, if space permits. Students working in the store could make final decisions about what items to take in or refuse, and work with the seller to set a fair price. Using tags or barcodes of some kind, we could track which item was sold by which student, and the profit would go to the seller. Perhaps a small portion would go towards paying the student workers, or any other expenses. Items that go unsold for a certain amount of time could be returned to the seller or donated, depending on the item and a prior agreement.

I believe that such a store would be popular among students and widely used. Currently, the only available option for exchanging goods is through word of mouth or using WSO/Switchboard, both of which don’t seem to be frequently used. It might also be possible to have the thrift store include an online site, with delivery!

⁵https://drive.google.com/file/d/1QFkr3fyce_lu8aYbCW1jajyETp_Hoz5eV/view?usp=sharing
⁶https://docs.google.com/document/d/1JizhYgaYD_3ge6GUq3Hd_0zPB20Gq5ScoCD11Sw2eY/edit?usp=sharing
Eliminating Course Packets

Course packets are a huge use of paper. If each student gets two course packets per semester, about 200 pages in length, 800,000 sheets of paper would be needed. And the actual number is probably even higher than that! I propose that the college switch to universal virtual course packets, as many other schools have already done.

At the time of writing this guide, we are still deep in the COVID pandemic, and the realities of virtual-learning have made virtual course packets a necessity. With so many students learning remotely for Fall 2020, many will have to read material online. I believe this is the perfect opportunity to assess the differences between paper and virtual. Guidance has already been released regarding Fall 2020, where packets are recommended to be virtual but can be printed on an opt-in basis, and I see this as a valuable first step forward. The next step would be to gather input from students and faculty about their preferences for paper vs virtual packets, whether this would affect their learning, and if they would be inclined to print packets out themselves, which would effectively nullify any rewards from virtual packets. Once more data is received, depending on results, I hope to see discussion for the next semesters.

4 Conclusion

Although many steps are being taken to improve sustainability at Williams, we have a long way to go to reach both our school goals, and our eventual goal, I hope, to be carbon neutral. Thank you again to Mike Evans and Caroline Bruno, the other interns, and everyone else I spoke with.