

Trash To Treasure – Creating a Second Life for Office Supplies at McMaster

SUSTAIN 3S03: Implementing Sustainable Change



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Trash to Treasure project students and their respective Community Project Champions posing with preowned furniture and office supplies.

From left to right: Fadi Matloub, Carlos Figueira, Daniyal Ali, Noha Shehata, Ofure Itua, Dave Cano.

Photo Credit: Dr. Kate Whalen

Overview

In Canada, over 25 million tonnes of municipal solid waste are generated each year.[1] Of this, 73% is disposed of in landfills and incinerators.[2] It is projected that implementing effective waste management practices can prevent 5 million tonnes of CO₂e emissions annually in Canada alone.[3]

At McMaster, in 2022, less than half (48%) of the 1,294 metric tonnes of solid waste is sent to landfill,[4] in part due to programs like the ACCESS Tech computer reuse program[5] and the Composting Champions program[6]. In 2019, McMaster established a Facebook group to repurpose university-owned furniture. Unfortunately, the global pandemic impeded the program's official launch. The goal of our project was to revive the Trash to Treasure initiative to further reduce waste at McMaster.

Objectives

1. Consult and engage with possible early adopters at McMaster.
2. Pilot and launch the 'Trash to Treasure' initiative.
3. Track, measure, and report on pilot outcomes.

Reporting

To accomplish our initial objective, we conducted interviews with 14 McMaster employees, many of which are responsible for furniture and/or office supplies in their respective areas. We gathered information about the potential utility of the initiative and identified possible challenges along with strategies for mitigating them. We used our findings to inform subsequent stages of our project and to engage interviewees as early adopters during the program's launch.

Moving on to our second objective, we successfully launched the Trash to Treasure initiative on the Microsoft Teams platform. This was accomplished by integrating insights from the interviews on essential features and services to include on the platform. To bolster our launch efforts, we disseminated information through a dedicated [Webpage](#). We featured a story on [McMaster Daily News](#), garnering significant attention as the fourth-most read article over a week. We also shared our project on Instagram where our content reached over 2,880 accounts within a week!

To achieve our third objective, we created a comprehensive excel sheet for tracking and quantifying number of items, estimated weight, and dollars saved through waste diversion. Within three weeks following the program launch there were 10 items listed for free or for sale, resulting in approximately 730 lbs of waste avoided and \$137 saved. Future additions aim to include costs avoided and associated emissions saved.

Following our interviews, consultations, and learning experiences, we presented our results to the McMaster Sustainability Advisory Committee. The Committee endorsed the initiative and agreed to amplify messaging among their respective departments and colleagues.

Collaborators

Instrumental support for this project has been provided by: our Community Project Champions, Carlos Figueira, Dave Cano, and Christa Morrison; project mentors, Dr. Kate Whalen and Nathan Butterworth; the staff members from departments across campus who shared their thoughts and advice, Lynne Serviss, Rachel Huang, Michael Wooder, Tracie Felton, Lindsey Kitchen, Jacob Brodka, Luanne Labreche, Jessica Colangelo, Joanie Cooke, Hufriya Kateli-Saxena, Lina Bontempo, Daniela Stajcer, Cathy Tatsis, and Mike Cupido; and communications and marketing experts who helped us share this initiative with the McMaster community, Ashley Low and Holly Gibson.

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