



Mercyhurst College
Erie, Pennsylvania
Trash to Treasure Program, Waste Reduction

SCHOOL

Mercyhurst College, Private, 4-year, 3500 students, Erie, Pennsylvania.

ABSTRACT

Stephanie Davison '04 started the Trash to Treasure program at Mercyhurst College in 2003 with help from the Student Green Team. During move-out at the end of the academic year they collected unopened food, gently used clothing, and quality used furniture and appliances and transported them to local charity organizations. The program was taken over by Dana Hyland in 2005, and is currently organized by a combination of Campus Ministry, Service Learning, Residence Life, and the Sustainability Office. We now work with four main charity organizations: Connecting Hands, Caring Closet, City Mission and Second Harvest Food Bank. Through this project Mercyhurst College is able to donate hundreds of pounds of food, clothing, furniture, appliances, and housewares to local charities that will be able to benefit those of the Erie community who need these items, with minimal cost to the college. Since these items are able to be donated rather than tossed in the dumpsters, the college is able to save money usually spent on hauling this trash to the landfill at the end of the academic year.

GOALS AND OUTCOMES

Goals

The green team students had noticed dumpsters full of items at the end of every academic year that still could be used, so their primary goal was to help divert trash from the landfill. Since then, our main goal now include partnering with local charity organizations in order to make sure the donations collected from students can be used properly and will help out those who need it most.

Over the next 2-3 years, as the program continues to grows, we hope to maintain our partnership with local charity agencies, but to increase the educational information available to our students and campus community about the types of charity agencies that exist, and how to properly donate their usable items. Our students are only with Mercyhurst College for four years, once they leave, we want to make sure they take the knowledge they have learned from us with them, and that includes continuing to donate their gently-used items.

Another goal is the make the program run more efficiency requiring better logistics and methods for dealing with large and weighty items, involve more people, and an easier method of transporting donations to our partnering agencies.

Trash to Treasure

As you pack up for the year, please do not throw anything away which could be used by someone in need!

Items collected will benefit Connecting Hands, the City Mission, the Caring Closet and Second Harvest Food Bank.



Trash to Treasure is sponsored by Residence Life, Service Learning, Campus Ministry and the Green Team.



Accomplishments and Outcomes

The Trash to Treasure program has been such a success that we have been able to continue it since 2003, that's nine years running. Our students have been able to divert hundreds of pounds of food, housewares, and clothing from the landfill each year and deliver these to those who can actually use them.

This last academic year, 2011, the program donated about 900 lbs of food to Second Harvest Food Bank; 176 bags of clothes with an estimate worth of about \$2635 to Caring Closet; and \$2000 worth of appliances and household goods including furniture , bedding, books, and kitchen supplies to Connecting Hands. Other miscellaneous items that either Caring Closet or Connecting Hands could not take were donated to the City Mission. These donations have allowed our maintenance department to save about \$1000 usually spent to empty the dumpsters since last year

Within our campus community we have been able to increase the participation this year to include the maintenance department, Residence Life, Campus Ministry, Service Learning, and the Sustainability Office. This year we were able to determine the best groups to work with and the best way to help distribute the donations.

Challenges and Responses

One of the largest challenges to this program is the logistics of designating donations areas, sorting through donations to determine trash versus useable items, transportation from campus buildings to a sorting location and then to the agencies, and, of course, labor. Over the past few years, we have been able to find better options. This year we decided to sort through donations at the collection areas prior to loading into the vans. It was also determined to be easier to have a separate van for each of the types of donations: large item donations, housewares, clothing, and food. Residence Life was a great benefit this year with the assistance of the RAs (residence assistants) who helped with sorting, loading, and transporting.

Communication is always key with large projects like this one. Making sure that the students are aware of the dates of the program, so they can plan accordingly when they begin to pack up their belongings is very important. Also letting students know that if they have large items such as couches or TVs, that they should notify us so it can be picked up immediately. That way it isn't damaged while waiting to be picked up at a later time. Another message to communicate, which we are hoping to improve upon, is reminding students that the items they are donating are going to be used by other people, and that they should sort out unusable, broken, or expired items prior to placing them in collection boxes.

Although donations are accepted throughout the last few weeks of the term as students move out, the collection, sorting, and donations of everything occurs after most of the students and faculty leave campus at the end of term. This can cause a lot of problems trying to gather enough volunteers to help. With help from Residence Life, we were able to make due, but the last few days of sorting and donating were difficult because they took place during and after graduation, and most RAs leave by then. This is something we may have to continue to improve.

Campus Climate Action: Your School's Carbon Footprint

As a signatory of the American College and University President's Climate Commitment (ACUPCC) and in support of the national campus greening movement, Mercyhurst College approved a Climate Action Plan in October 2010 for the Erie Campus setting the year 2030 as a target for campus carbon neutrality. Directly related to carbon emissions, this program helps to decrease our waste stream by hauling less trash to the landfill and recycling usable items to those who need them generating less GHG emissions.

Commentary and Reflection

When you see the volume of items that are donated you appreciate the worth and need of this project. Even if you decide to start small and only work with one section or area of residential buildings, there is a large amount of stuff that people toss because they either will not use it again, or do not want to haul it home. A recommendation to those who decide to start a similar program is to start planning earlier; a few weeks of planning will not do this project justice and will cause more problems when you actually start collecting. Give yourself several months of planning and talking with campus groups so that you have volunteers to help with sorting and transporting, boxes for collections, and vehicles for transporting the donations. These are all vital things for this program to work. Do not underestimate the need for communication either. Notify your campus community about the project with enough time before students begin to move out and give them enough information to understand what you are trying to accomplish and the items you are looking to collect.

ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

Leaders and Supporters

This program is headed by our AmeriCorps Vista, Marta Baran; Director of Campus Ministry, Greg Baker; Director of Service Learning, Colin Hurley; Assistance Director of Residence Life, Jessica Provenzano; and Sustainability Coordinator, Brittany Prischak. The maintenance department was helpful in lending us vehicles for transportation, and residence life offered us volunteers to help with sorting and transporting the donations.

Our partnering charity organizations were Connecting Hands, who took our household items including furniture and appliances; Caring Closet, who took the clothing; Second Harvest Food Bank, who took the donated food items; and the City Mission, who was able to take any house hold items or clothing not taken by the other organizations.

Funding and Resources

There was minimal funding needed for this project. Lowe's donated large cardboard boxes which were placed in the residence buildings for students to place donated items and Betty Amatangelo, Campus Ministry secretary, lent us large plastic crates to help with sorting and transporting donations.

Money was used for boxes, signage, a few minor other items, but most of the work was done with volunteers. If we had more funding, we could rent larger vehicles, like a U-Haul, instead of using the college vans. That would make it much easier to transport large items, and we could haul more at once rather than making several trips.

Education and Community Outreach

This program is primarily for the campus residential population, though a few faculty and staff members have donated items.

Residence life helped with communication efforts by posting signs in all of the upperclass apartments and townhouses, as well as freshman residence halls notifying students of the program and its details. They also held a special evening event for the freshman, providing food and assistance as they were packing stuff and moving out.

Mercyhurst Colleges sends out e-newsletters to staff and faculty daily and to students weekly. Advertisements about the Trash to Treasure program were included in this e-newsletters letting students know when they could start donating items, where to place them, and what we would be doing with the donations. Signs were also posted on all of the dumpsters asking students to reconsider donating some of the items they may want to trash.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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Case study submitted by: Brittany Prischak

MORE ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL

Campus Sustainability History

Environmental and social responsibility is an integral part of Mercyhurst College's mission. The college is committed to educating their students and community about living green lifestyles to ensure a sustainable future for everyone. They encourage ongoing participation in recycling and the idea of energy conservation both on and off campus. As part of an undergraduate degree, the college offers a Sustainability Studies major and minor, or a Sustainability Studies concentration in either the Biology or Chemistry departments, as well as a Sustainability Studies Post-Baccalaureate certificate for students interested in enhancing their overall educational experience with an environmental focus. Also, the biology department provides the Mercyhurst College community with several ways to get involved in sustainability projects, activities, and volunteering efforts.

Website Link to Mercyhurst College's Sustainability Program: <http://sustainability.mercyhurst.edu>

Image credit: Greg Baker, Director of Mercyhurst College Campus Ministry