



## **Student Leadership: Environmental Stewardship Through Leading by Example**

by I.A. Bas Blankenstijn and Meredith R. Atchison, Western Michigan University

Leading by example is a topic we teach our students in nearly every program and activity we facilitate. If we do not only want to “talk the talk,” but also “walk the walk” we as instructors, advisors and student-affairs professionals should be leading our students by example.

Several years ago, the students of [Western Michigan University](#) (WMU) chose to impose a [Student Sustainability Fee \(SSF\)](#) that would be used to create a culture of sustainability throughout the University. An interesting factor in implementing this fee is that its distribution and application of funds was not completely left up to administrators.

A substantial portion of the funds collected through this SSF is dedicated to be used for student led sustainability initiatives. At WMU, any student, whether undergraduate or graduate, is eligible to submit a grant proposal for a student sustainability initiative. These grant proposals are reviewed and evaluated by a committee of current students from various majors and concentrations.

As graduate students, we often hold assistantships in various forms such as teaching, advising, or research. In our positions, we interact with students in a role of leadership and some of us will actually attempt to teach leadership skills. Through the [Student Activities and Leadership Programs office](#) and as financial advisors to Registered Student Organizations (RSO) at the university, we attempt to teach students who engage in extracurricular activities to be financially responsible in the management of their organization’s funds. RSOs receive these funds through various programs at the university.

One of the funding sources is a portion of the Student Sustainability Fund. Part of the commitment includes giving financial advice to the successful recipients of sustainability grant proposals. All of these recipients and RSO treasurers are required to attend a financial



workshop before funds are disbursed. At these workshops the students receive an informational packet of approximately 40 pages.

### **Sustainability in process**

After reviewing the previous process of disseminating information to students, we found that our process was not contributing to the culture of sustainability we were striving to create on campus. While attempting to teach students about responsibility—in this case financial responsibility—we discovered that handing out informational packets in paper-format was wasteful and showed lack of environmental consciousness. This fact became more evident after we multiplied the number of participants in the workshops by the amount of paper given to each student.

We felt that in light of the relationship of this workshop to the sustainability efforts at the University, it was our social responsibility to create a better and more sustainable way of disseminating this information to others. Our vision about how to accomplish this included finding a way to provide all the current workshop information (and more) without using a single sheet of paper.

### **A paperless vision**

To provide our students with the necessary information during the workshops, we debated various ways to do so without using paper. One of the first ideas that emerged was providing all the materials online via the university's website. After considering this idea, we concluded that was not a feasible option because some of the information provided in the packets included a log-in code to a program. Therefore, we decided to pursue a paperless route using USB drives instead of an online publication.

At first, we considered converting all the materials to regular USB drives. However, it was suggested to us we could potentially find a more sustainable product and house the materials online. Because the latter was not an option, and our vision favored USB drives, we set out to search for USB drives that were produced using a sustainable manufacturing process.



Our search resulted in the Nature Flash Drive<sup>1</sup> from Flashbay Inc.<sup>2</sup> Surpassing our expectations, this particular USB drive is a certified carbon-neutral product.<sup>3</sup>

### **Projected outcomes**

We are currently in the beginning stages of using the new format of USB drives to distribute our informational packages to students. As of June 2012, we have completely eliminated all paper printing for the financial workshops. Students attending the workshop are now receiving all of the information that was previously handed out on paper via USB. In addition, we now provide our students with electronic copies and examples of all University financial forms pertaining to student organizations. In the fall, we will add copies of the entire “RSO Handbook”<sup>4</sup> and “RSO Financial Handbook”<sup>5</sup> to the USB drives. Aside from the information we provide, students will have a substantial amount of device memory available to store information regarding their grants or organizations.

By eliminating the paper packets, we will reduce our annual printing by an estimated 15,200 pages. When factoring in the printing costs (such as paper, toner, electricity), and comparing this to the cost of the USB drives, this will amount to a savings of approximately \$3,298 annually.

Due to the availability of storage on the USB drives, we are now able to provide our students with any additional information without the need for extra printing. When updates to the material are necessary, we can further eliminate printing and paper use by reusing the USB drives and uploading the latest versions of documents and forms. Students are required to provide current contact information when receiving the USB drives. When updates become available, students are contacted to return the USB drives to our office where we will upload the new or additional materials.

We project that students will not discard a USB drive as easily as they would a paper packet, and thus retain the materials provided to them better than before. This is an additional benefit for us because it makes it easier to refer to our handouts.



## Setting the example

Through this grant, we hope to set a positive example for our students. We are setting the stage by showing it is also our social responsibility to eliminate wasteful processes and to improve our efforts of creating a meaningful environment of sustainability at our University. Having the ability to disseminate the information via USB drives has led to great discussions at the workshops and has been a helpful tool to address sustainability and social responsibility. We encourage other graduate students, where possible, to seek alternatives to the traditional use of paper.

## References

1. For more information about Nature Flash Drive, visit [www.flashbay.com/products/wooden-flash-drive.html](http://www.flashbay.com/products/wooden-flash-drive.html).
2. For more information about Flashbay Inc., visit [www.flashbay.com](http://www.flashbay.com).
3. For certification information, visit [http://www.flashbay.com/images/certificates/Nature\\_ECO.pdf](http://www.flashbay.com/images/certificates/Nature_ECO.pdf) (case sensitive).
4. Student Activities and Leadership Programs, "RSO Handbook," unpublished manuscript.
5. Student Activities and Leadership Programs, "RSO Financial Handbook," unpublished manuscript.

*I. A. Bas Blankenstijn is a graduate assistant serving as the Registered Student Organization Financial Advisor for the Student Activities & Leadership Programs Office at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, MI. He has previously earned his bachelor's degree in finance from Western Michigan University, and is currently pursuing a master's degree in educational leadership through the Higher Education and Student Affairs program at Western Michigan University.*



*Meredith R. Atchison is a graduate assistant serving as the Registered Student Organization Development Advisor for the Student Activities & Leadership Programs Office at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, MI. She has a bachelor's degree in textile development and marketing from the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, and is currently pursuing a Master's of Arts in Educational Leadership through the Higher Education and Student Affairs program at Western Michigan University.*