

# **FROM GRASS ROOTS TO VITAL PLAYER: MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY'S LIBRARY ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITTEE**

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## **Introduction**

In the spring of 2008, Michigan State University's Office of Campus Sustainability (OCS) launched an ambitious effort to make the East Lansing campus more sustainable by introducing an Environmental Steward Program.<sup>1</sup> The impetus behind this program was altruism (the University is one of only seven active university members of the Chicago Climate Exchange<sup>2</sup>), tempered with cold fiscal realities (recycling and energy conservation have potential for reducing operating costs).<sup>3</sup> The Office of Campus Sustainability crafted a stewardship initiative that enlisted the occupants and custodial staff of each campus building.<sup>4</sup> However, they did not extend this initiative to the Michigan State University (MSU) Libraries, because its Library Environmental Committee (LEC) already had an active structure in place that addressed sustainability goals, especially in recycling. This essay will describe the MSU Libraries LEC's current organization and operations and how this Committee became a campus leader on environmental matters.

## **Michigan State University And Its Library System**

MSU is the designated land-grant institution for the state of Michigan. For the past three decades, its enrollment has ranged between 40,000 and 47,000 students with over 11,000 faculty and staff.<sup>5</sup> The Michigan State University Libraries (MSUL) have approximately 4.5 million volumes housed in a Main Library and several smaller branch libraries on the East Lansing campus, with one branch at a small biological station an hour away. The Libraries employ approximately 175 permanent staff members as well as more than 270 students. The Main Library is composed of two wings (one built in 1955; the other in 1967) and has undergone numerous upgrades over its life.<sup>6</sup> It sits at the southern boundary of an area designated MSU's "sacred space," a campus park area among older buildings landscaped with mature trees, other plantings, and pathways, where no further buildings may be constructed.<sup>7</sup> It is also adjacent to an historical botanical garden.<sup>8</sup> The 5,200-acre<sup>9</sup> campus is considered an "arboretum to support the university's teaching, research, and outreach mission."<sup>10</sup> Finally, a strong interdisciplinary Environmental Studies and Policy Program (ESPP) is flourishing on campus, pulling researchers together from multiple MSU colleges.<sup>11</sup>

### **LEC's Official Status within MSUL**

The Library Environmental Committee is part of the MSUL formal organization. Its charge is to:

"Focus on the Libraries' use of natural resources with an eye toward sustainability, while maintaining and improving our overall working and learning environment." Areas of concern for the LEC include:

- paper printing and copier use
- energy use--lighting and computers
- heating and cooling
- cleaning supplies and chemicals
- office supplies
- recycling and waste reduction
- parking and transportation
- general design issues that have an ecological impact.<sup>12</sup>

The LEC reports to the MSUL Director, without being part of any department or without being part of any department or other hierarchy in the Libraries. The Director, the MSUL Executive Council, and individual library units, departments and committees consult with the LEC about its areas of responsibility. The LEC's tasks include:

- 1) Advising library administration and staff
- 2) Providing information for staff
- 3) Maintaining a list of resources related to these issues
- 4) Acting as liaison with MSU's Office of Recycling and Waste
- 5) Reduction and contacting other units as required and approved.<sup>13</sup>

Individual staff members are free to interact with the LEC; they do not have to ask a supervisor's permission. The Committee's monthly meetings are open to the staff at large. Its agendas and minutes are shared with the entire staff and posted on the MSUL intranet site.

### **Structure of the LEC**

The LEC has about ten members, all library employee volunteers, both librarians and other staff, who have a personal interest in environmental issues. This personal dedication is key to the success of the committee, as enthusiasm and conviction about environmental causes sustains the members' willingness to work on such matters for the MSUL. There are no requirements that the committee should have representation from all MSUL units, *ex officio* members, or a specified library staff/librarian ratio. Moreover, LEC has no permanent chair or recorder. Those duties are rotated among the members at each month's meeting. There is also no fixed term of membership; members may decide to leave or take a break from the committee at any time. If a member leaves, the committee will recruit a replacement in order to keep the number of members roughly the same. Members find replacements by sending out requests to all library staff for expressions of interest or by personally recruiting library employees who seem to be sympathetic to environmental issues.

This framework, developed over several decades, gives the LEC broad flexibility in carrying out its charges. Its activities are determined by the individual members' concerns, through referrals from official MSUL and University channels, and by direct contact from interested staff members.

While this structure is unconventional, its advantages usually outweigh any disadvantages. First, its members know that they have to share leadership, and no one person feels overburdened. Secondly, these volunteers are enthusiastic because of their interest in environmental matters. Thirdly, each member brings personal interests and expertise which gives the committee a broad knowledge base and many contacts for networking within the libraries, on campus and in the community. Long-time members provide institutional memory.

Without a designated chair/spokesperson, the committee relies on members' self-directed initiative to take the lead for different activities. This has worked because the committee tends to attract dedicated members. Some members naturally are more

comfortable with leadership than others so there is informal leadership within the committee, but it does not rest with only one person. One disadvantage of this structure is that administrators are occasionally unsure of a proper contact person in time-critical situations.

Ability to work on projects also depends on different members' workloads, which means that different people will be able to help out more or less at any given time. E-mail enables rapid routing of administrators' concerns amongst the committee members and online discussion of issues that need quick resolution. In most cases, someone from the committee is designated by the group as the person to follow up on a particular concern.

Discussions in LEC meetings are wide-ranging and enrich the members' knowledge bases. The development and maintenance of a Web site for the LEC has enabled information to be archived and easily retrieved. Participation on the LEC is considered library committee service work by supervisors during annual evaluations, but personal dedication and interest of the members are the primary reasons they are willing to volunteer for a variety of tasks.

## **Activities**

### **Communication/Education**

One of the LEC's most visible activities is the monthly email *Ecogram* to all library staff. The subject of each post is chosen at the monthly meeting and is composed by the recorder. Topics are usually of a practical nature and focus on ways to be more environmentally conscious either at work or at home. Past subjects have included:

- light bulb replacement
- university-wide recycling goals
- library participation in campus-wide "dim-down,"
- local community recycling programs
- energy-saving features on personal computers
- tips to make the holidays more green
- announcements of Earth Day and Smart Commute activities (see below)

Another regular communication with MSUL staff is the email distribution of the minutes of the monthly meeting. In addition to providing the official record of LEC deliberations, the minutes remind the library staff that there is a dedicated, active body devoted to environmental matters in their workplace. Archival copies of the *Ecograms* and minutes appear on the LEC web site, and in public folders of the MSUL e-mail server.

The LEC is also involved in educating new library employees on the specifics and importance of recycling and conservation at the MSU Libraries. The LEC has worked

with the Libraries' human resources department to be included on the "new employee checklist" of mandated orientations to be completed within the new employee's first weeks on the job. The form gives new hires a contact person within the LEC who will meet with them.

In-person continuing education of current library staff about recycling and conservation also takes place at different occasions, and the LEC looks for these opportunities when possible. The LEC has been invited to present information at all staff meetings and library departmental meetings. The committee has also created a poster about recycling to be displayed at staff social events involving food. Other special events organized by the LEC, such as speaker programs and Earth Day activities (described below), offer opportunities for education.

### **Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle**

Recycling has been and continues to be a primary LEC activity. In fact, an early version of the committee was first formed in the late 1980s as a result of staff volunteer recycling efforts that had been active since the 1970s. Although the LEC does not have any authority to compel the library staff to recycle, its members encourage recycling in various ways.

When the Main Library first began recycling, there was a need to provide education and instruction for staff. This became increasingly important as more types of paper and other solid waste were added to the list of recyclable materials, and education continues to be necessary to this day. The Committee has posted informational signs, offered training to units, encouraged the Library Director to email staff about the importance of recycling, and led recycling efforts by personal example. LEC members also look out for obstacles to recycling efforts and encourage staff behavioral change on a variety of fronts.

In the early days, committee members transported materials to local recycling centers on their own time. Later, when on-campus recycling became available, members went through recycling bins and sorted mixed paper and other materials into appropriate groupings. Fortunately, recent enhancements to the campus-wide recycling program make this no longer necessary as a variety of materials may now be placed in a single container, simplifying the process for those who want to recycle.<sup>14</sup> The Committee now negotiates with MSU Recycling staff for more recycling containers within the libraries. It checks various areas of the libraries to make sure that recycling containers are visible and convenient and that trash cans do not predominate.

LEC volunteers also recycle material from the staff lounge in the Main Library. Thanks to Michigan's "bottle bill" which puts a ten cent deposit on soft drink containers,<sup>15</sup> the committee has accumulated a modest deposit refund which is held in a Library Staff Association account. The LEC uses this fund to buy books and video materials on

environmental topics for the Libraries' collection. Selections are made at the monthly LEC meetings.

Dedication to recycling as many materials as possible led committee members to look beyond local recycling efforts to find ways to recycle outdated cassettes, CDs, jewel boxes, VHS tapes, and DVDs before the university enabled recycling of these items. Some members took these materials home or on travels to appropriate recycling facilities. Although the Libraries was required by contract to use Canon toner cartridges instead of easier to recycle models, one member found a place to recycle the Canon cartridges.

The LEC's leadership in MSUL's recycling efforts over the years has earned it respect from library administration and other library unit leaders. These units have learned to consult the LEC on policies that may have an environmental impact. For example, the Main Library Copy Center received a proposal from an MSU student regarding a company that would place paid advertising on the back of students' printouts so that their printing would be free. The LEC cautioned that this proposal would likely encourage waste, based on experience from the 1990s when the Libraries provided free printing. The Library administration agreed with LEC's caution, and free printing was not adopted. This policy stance illustrates the LEC's involvement in advocating "reducing and reusing" as well as recycling.

The other side to recycling is encouraging the use of products made from recycled materials. All of the printing and copying in the MSU Libraries provided a good opportunity to use paper made from recycled content. The LEC worked with the Main Library's Copy Center to find 100% post-consumer recycled, non-chlorine bleached paper for copiers and printers. The University General Stores staff was initially reluctant to carry this more expensive product. The LEC convinced the Library administration to purchase the paper directly from the manufacturer instead. The paper was used exclusively throughout the library system. Eventually, General Stores purchased this paper in small quantities and found that other campus units also wanted an environmentally- friendly type of paper. As demand continued to grow, General Stores purchased larger quantities, bringing the price down so that 100% recycled paper became economical as well as sustainable.

The LEC continues to encourage library units to minimize or replace paper publications with electronic ones when possible. Individual members have contacted MSU departments to reconsider their paper publishing practices. The response has been positive since many units now produce e-versions of their publications.

The LEC is concerned not only with recycling but also with energy usage within the MSU Libraries. Energy usage is a more complex issue, however, with less opportunity for the committee to take a hands-on approach. Some years ago the MSU Libraries replaced lights in one wing of the building to much more energy-efficient products to considerably reduce costs. This was a major project that the LEC applauded but was not

directly involved in. Some things the committee has been able to do are to meet with members of the MSU Libraries computer systems and information technology staff to discuss ways that staff and public computers can be set up for energy efficiency.

Systems staff has implemented some of these ideas, and much energy-saving occurs simply through routine upgrades of equipment. Members of the LEC would prefer to see the MSU Libraries administration require library employees to follow energy-saving recommendations, such as removing screen savers from their computers (which unnecessarily waste energy), but the official policy of the administration has been to make suggestions and encouragements to employees without strict requirements.

### **Involvement in Campus-wide Initiatives**

Two changes at the university, the development of a campus-wide Environmental Steward Program and opening of a new recycling center have evolved the campus recycling program into a disciplined, coordinated effort in all campus buildings. The opening in fall 2009 of a new Surplus Store and Recycling Center has greatly expanded the variety of materials that can be recycled at MSU, enhancing the University's revenue stream and simplifying waste collection.

The Environmental Steward Program is a major initiative that flowed from MSU President Lou Anna K. Simon's 2005 announcement of a "Boldness By Design" vision for the university's future. Its "Strategic Imperative 5" aims to "strengthen stewardship by appreciating and nurturing the university's financial assets, campus environment and infrastructure and people for outstanding performance today and tomorrow."<sup>16</sup> (emphasis added)

As a key element of the stewardship program, the Office of Campus Sustainability assigned each building's custodial staff to become Environmental Stewards and take over emptying all building recycling along with the trash. One member of the LEC had been acting as the MSUL liaison with campus recyclers. This new framework gave that LEC member new opportunity to work directly with MSU Libraries facilities staff, since they oversee the work of custodians and could make sure that problems with recycling are resolved.

### **Earth Day and Other Outreach Activities**

Earth Day provides an occasion for focus and education on environmental topics both on the campus and in the MSU Libraries. Organizing Earth Day programs for the public and staff in the MSU Libraries is another high-visibility LEC activity. Each year, the committee plans activities for the upcoming Earth Day, with individual members taking the lead in implementing them. Earth Day activities have included: Main Library displays relevant to environmental and conservation themes; a staff pizza party that screened

environmental videos; continuously running videos on appropriate Earth Day topics in a high traffic public area; a table of pamphlets, library books, and handouts listing web sites related to environmental issues, and a "recycling game" developed and run by LEC members in the Main Library lobby aimed at teaching library staff and patrons what kinds of materials can be recycled in appropriate containers.

Besides Earth Day activities, the LEC also arranges outreach and educational programs throughout the year. Since 2008, the committee has hosted a regular series of guided tours of the historical Beal Botanical Garden<sup>17</sup> (located just outside the Main Library building) by the garden's resident naturalist. The LEC has also hosted local speakers on topics such as green LEED-certified building, wind energy, raising backyard chickens, urban farming, and other topics. Initially these presentations were very occasional and informal. In 2010 these events became an official library series, and publicity was more formally coordinated by the Library's PR committee. So far these talks have been primarily attended by MSU Libraries staff, but a goal is to increase visibility for these events to the rest of campus and the public. Publicity consists of news releases, features on the library website, posters, and on flat-screen monitors in the Main Library lobby. One of the first programs, in March 2010, was *What Are the Links Between Hunger and the Environment?* The discussion about food, poverty, and the environment was led by Terry Link, a former MSU reference librarian and the first Director of MSU Office of Campus Sustainability, who is currently Executive Director of the Greater Lansing Food Bank.

The LEC has involved the MSU Libraries not only in campus-wide, but also in Greater Lansing environmental programs. One of these activities, called "Smart Commute", is an initiative that promotes environmentally-friendly transportation options in the Greater Lansing area as an alternative to driving alone.<sup>23</sup> The Smart Commute Challenge takes place over a couple weeks in the spring of each year with different local organizations competing to log the most number of alternative transportation trips by their employees. The alternative trips can include carpooling, telecommuting, biking, walking, or taking public transportation.

Different members of the LEC have taken turns organizing the MSU Libraries' participation as one of the organizations competing in the challenge. One committee member taught Smart Commute cycling classes in the library and in the community during the same period. He taught people how to safely ride their bicycles on city streets during their commutes to and from work. Participation by library employees in the challenge has been excellent. The MSU Libraries consistently placed second in the Large Company category from 2007 - 2009, and, in 2010, it won that same category with 1,077 trips completed by 40 staff members. The LEC also has contributed some of its own funds as a sponsor of the Smart Commute Challenge.



## Current Activities

The current challenge for the LEC is to better coordinate the MSU Libraries' sustainability efforts with the fledgling MSU Environmental Steward Program. All members currently receive monthly reports from MSU's Office of Campus Sustainability with Main Library building information on waste, recycling, and energy use. LEC members have suspected inaccuracies in some of the statistics and are working with OCS for clarification.

One point of information these reports reveals to the committee is that staff recycling and especially energy conservation efforts in a high-traffic public building like the Main Library can only go so far. Its Cyber Café, for instance, is a heavy user of electricity, but neither the LEC nor the MSUL administration has direct control over its usage. Moreover, the Main Library is open 24 hours during weekdays, and patron use of the Main Library's 550 computers and electrical outlets for their personal laptops continues to increase, with resulting increases of our building's electrical use. LEC continues to wrestle with this dilemma.

Recycling and conservation efforts at branch libraries around the campus are also an LEC concern. These branches are located in buildings operated by various MSU Colleges and departments. The MSU Libraries' administration and, therefore, the LEC must work with the Campus Stewards and the policies in these buildings. Even though the Campus Steward Program is MSU-wide, and conservation is a campus-wide goal, different units may be more or less interested or able to enforce policies. Furthermore, branch libraries within these buildings usually must follow decisions of building operators regarding such matters as whether lights will be on all night. On the other hand, the branch libraries provide an opportunity for the LEC and the MSU Libraries to try pilot projects on a small-scale. The MSU business library staff, for instance, is currently piloting a program that puts numerous large containers for plastics and paper recycling in visible places, while removing the usual ubiquitous trash cans. Only very small boxes marked "for landfill" are made available for waste that cannot be recycled. If this program is successful in encouraging even more recycling at the business branch library, it could eventually be expanded to more branch libraries and to the Main Library.

In 2010 the Main Library Building was recognized by the Office of Campus Sustainability's Green Certification Program which "is designed to recognize, assist, and promote units that are taking steps toward reducing their environmental footprint."<sup>18</sup> For this certification, the LEC submitted self-assessment forms about the Main Library in two campus categories: "Information Technology Spaces" and "Offices." The "Info Tech" application measures the effective communication and education of environmental goals and policies, energy efficiency & conservation, recycling & waste reduction, water conservation, and purchasing [of recycled/reused products].<sup>19</sup> The "Offices" application evaluates the use of employees' personal computers, office equipment, printing, copying, and recycling & waste reduction.<sup>20</sup> Green Certification promotes the MSU

Libraries' efforts with campus-wide recognition use of a Green Certification Logo, prominent display of a Green Certification Plaque in the Main Library, and a special designation on Environmental Stewardship Reports.<sup>21</sup> Thanks to activities that the committee had already been promoting, the LEC found that the building was compliant with recommendations in almost all of each forms' categories.

### **Adaptability of the MSUL LEC Model**

The MSU Library Environmental Committee demonstrates the value of having an active group devoted to environmental issues within a library. The LEC has been able to establish credibility with the staff and the library administration to the point where it has recently been invited to draft the Libraries' official response to campus administration requests for information on environmental matters.

Many of the activities and programs that MSU's LEC crafts and promotes are the types of activities that could be planned or mandated by a library's administration instead. What the MSU Libraries LEC model uniquely provides is a grass-roots leadership effort that results in longer-lasting staff commitment to sustainable environmental programs. This kind of committee doesn't fit neatly into a very hierarchical structure that some libraries may use for their organization. However, this model does have the potential to work well, since environmental issues do not belong solely to any one unit or department of a library. Having a committee composed of people from multiple departments who are passionate about environmental issues is a major strength of the model. Concerns particular to different units, such as library facilities or copying/printing departments, are more likely to be discussed knowledgeably. Library employees have their choice of several LEC members with whom they can share concerns or ask questions rather than only one person or one administrator who may be less approachable. Finally, library or campus administration-mandated efforts at recycling or energy conservation are usually framed as ways to save the college or university money. This goal may not necessarily be motivating to employees at all levels. The MSU Libraries has found that when a library administration allows people whose motivations come from personal convictions to take leadership, the efforts become more personally engaging, educational, and are more likely to meet with success.

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- <sup>13</sup> *LEC Home*
- <sup>14</sup> *MSU Recycling* <http://www.recycle.msu.edu/index.htm> (accessed Apr. 27, 2011)
- <sup>15</sup> Dave Dempsey. *Ruin & Recovery: Michigan's Rise as a Conservation Leader* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 182-183.
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- <sup>17</sup> *Beal Botanical Garden*.
- <sup>18</sup> Office of Campus Sustainability. *Green Certification* <http://www.bespartangreen.msu.edu/greencert/> (accessed Apr. 27, 2011).
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[http://www.bespartangreen.msu.edu/greencert/applications/it\\_distributed.pdf](http://www.bespartangreen.msu.edu/greencert/applications/it_distributed.pdf) (accessed Apr. 27, 2011).
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