The Paper Trail: Understanding a Strategic Solution to Reducing Occidental’s Paper Use

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Since 2008, Occidental College has not instated a limit on the amount of paper pages students, faculty members, staff, and administration can print on network printers. This lack of accountability for the amount of pages faculty, staff, students, and administration can print has lead to an exorbitant amount of paper wasted at the cost of the environment and the college. During the 2013-2014 academic year alone, July 1st 2013 until July 1st 2014, 1.8 million pages were printed. This is equivalent to 484.35 trees. This report was created as part of a sustainability Fellowship Funded by Facilities Management to create a plan to reduce the amount of paper Occidental College uses in order to contribute to a more sustainable lifestyle for those within and outside of the Occidental community.

**Background**

According to the current Information Technology Services (ITS) at Occidental, it is unknown why the printing quota at was lifted in 2005. ITS maintains the ability to instate a quota system on all network printers. In 2011, an art student began stacking the unretrieved pages next to network printers in the Academic Commons. This act to heighten awareness lead to ITS instating a ‘swipe system.’ This system was rolled at the same time network printers within the Academic Commons were being replaced in 2012. The ‘swipe’ system limits printers from printing automatically after a document is sent to the network printer. This system is currently in place at Occidental College; a valid Occidental identification needs to be swiped or entered into a network printer before the printer will print the document. According to ITS, this has resulted in an 18% reduction in the amount of paper wasted. However, this is still not enough if 40,443 pounds of paper are used per year.
Based on a case study completed by interns of ITS in 2013, out of sixteen peer institutions, Occidental is one of three other schools that does not have a printing quota of some nature. The other three include Colorado College, Macalester College, and Swarthmore College. This amount of wasted resources does not fit into Occidental’s goal of fostering a “sustainable community.” If most all other peer institutions have implemented a successful printing quota to de-incentivize printing and reduce paper use, Occidental College is charged with the same task.

**Quota as the solution**

The main goal of a printing quota, at least for the 2014-2015 academic year, would be to eliminate the outliers who print over 1,000 sheets a semester. According to ITS, the average amount a student prints per semester on a network printer is 800 sheets. Setting a printing quota to this amount would not affect the academics of students, but would eliminate those who print entire textbooks or novels; it would address the unnecessary printing jobs that cause the most damage. ITS has suggested $0.05 per page in an effort to merely bring attention to the idea of charging for printing. This cost would be automatically added to the students’ account. This cost is miniscule and is not intended to accumulate profit. The minor profit that may be accumulated form the quota would be allocated to the ASOC Renewable Energy and Sustainability Fund or another sustainability initiative on campus. Along with 800 pages as the limit until $0.05 is added to each page, ITS would send out an e-mail every week alerting the student of the amount of pages printed and what is left on their quota.

The main objective of instating a quota is to foster a culture change around paper use on campus. This requires a change in habits and a change beyond a small charge for printing. The quota is the first step to making the paperless option the instinctive option. That is to say, easing
students and faculty into a paper free lifestyle; making the paper free option the easy option. The facts may speak for themselves to begin the change, but action must be taken in order to change the culture.

**Methods for Action**

*Garner Community Support*

The first step to changing the status quo of paper use is to garner community support. It needs to be clear to the community that the quota is not for profit, but to reduce paper use. The community needs to be a part of this change, as paper is a staple of the academic experience. Students are the main target of the quota, as they are the largest population on campus, and so will have the greatest impact. Faculty cannot be targeted to reduce paper as it may inhibit their ability to teach. The students, therefore, must fully understand the impact of paper use. As seen on campus, it seems that paper use has been forgotten as a problem due to the “blue bins” seen on campus that evoke a misunderstanding that paper is being used and recycled responsibly. This is in fact, not the case. Paper needs to return to the forefront of students’ minds when it comes to reducing consumption, much like plastic waterbottles on campus. Students cannot feel like they have to print every reading and assignment in order to excel in their academics. This reduction in paper use may need to be major specific; English majors likely use more paper than math majors, for example. Instating a quota that the community supports is key to creating a culture of paper reduction.
Faculty Workshops

In order for students to reduce paper use, faculty must foster a classroom setting that does not rely on paper as the main medium of information sharing. The technology is already in place for this environment to thrive. Moodle needs to be the cornerstone of the classroom experience with assignments and readings all posted on Moodle. Faculty should also become accustomed to grading assignments on Moodle. The transition from doing all assignments on paper to online for both students and faculty will require workshops for a smoother transition. Students need to understand that readings can be highlighted and annotated by downloading readings to a computer. Technology workshops will help clarify for both faculty and staff that paper is not necessary to the academic process, and that simple habit changes will lead to a paperless lifestyle. Welcome, the newly launched mobile device application, is another option in expanding the use of technology as an alternative to paper. This application connects Google drive documents to social media. Meaning a professor can upload all documents to the application and students can access them at all times, discussing the topics via social media. This is all to address the fact that the technology is already in place for students and faculty to contribute to a paper-free academic experience. Workshops will ensure that taking full advantage of this technology will make the paperless option the easy option.

Timing of Instating a Quota

There has been discussion around when the most effective time to roll-out the printing quota would be. One school of thought points to the Fall, with the incoming freshmen. Another points to the Winter after break, where students would be equally affected and notified of the
system change. In either case, the quota would still not affect the majority of students at Occidental who print 800 pages or less.

**Action during Spring 2015**

Steps have been taken this spring in order to lay the groundwork for rolling out a printing quota within the year. The first step was approaching the student sustainability community on campus. The ASOC Renewable Energy and Sustainability Fund submitted a letter of support for the printing quota, and various sustainability clubs on campus have verbally signed on as well, including the Bike Cage, FEAST, and the Oxy Beekeepers. This is a symbolic gesture that will help build a student platform for why the reduction of paper is so crucial. This also shows student solidarity around the issue and that academics can be done without paper.

Most of the action around laying the groundwork for a printing quota occurred around Earth Week (4/20/15-4/24/15). This included a Sustainability Forum, hosted by the Renewable Energy and Sustainability Fund, where ITS had the space to express frustration with the current waste of paper to a small group of faculty and staff. This led to a productive conversation about best steps to take to reduce paper use. The information, in this case, spoke for itself in garnering support from community members.

Another step taken to increase campus awareness was the Quad Fair that ITS participated in on April 22nd, 2015. This included clubs from across campus that came and discussed issues and solutions around sustainability on campus. Most of the school walked through and participated in talking with the clubs. ITS shared information about the amount of paper wasted on campus, which garnered much support from the campus community.
The third action that was taken as part of Earth Week was an e-mail that was sent on Friday, April 24th, 2015 in honor of Arbor Day. This included the same facts ITS shared at the Sustainability Forum and at the Quad Fair, but was more personal because the information was delivered to the campus community’s personal e-mails. Due to these three events, the amount of paper used from printing has become a topic of conversation on campus.

Next Steps

The next steps in successfully incorporating a printing quota into the Occidental College campus center around continuing to garner community support. This can be done through surveys regarding the amount faculty, staff, administration, and students print based on department, major, and class. The surveys need to directly address the community not already involved in sustainability on campus and will create a better understanding for where most of the paper demand is coming from. A presentation at a faculty meeting should be given to outline the quota and how it should impact their teaching styles; less paper does not mean less information. These two methods of translating information to the community will build a community around a paperless lifestyle.

Ideally, a culture will be built to allow a successful reduction in paper use each year. By reducing the quota 200 pages each year starting in 2015, Occidental College could be a paperless campus by 2020. This should be a consideration in surveying the community.

Conclusion

Based on the amount of paper used by the Occidental College community, action by peer institutions, and infrastructure already in place to address paper use, it is necessary for
Occidental College to instate a printing quota. The minimal profit from this quota could contribute to a student-lead sustainability endeavor, such as the ASOC Renewable Energy and Sustainability Fund. Steps taken thus far have centered around community awareness of the amount of paper students use. Future steps should include faculty workshops in phasing out paper teaching and reducing the printing quota every year.
Dear Occidental Community,

We, the Associated Student of Occidental College: Renewable Energy and Sustainability Fund, fully support the initiative to reduce the community’s paper use by instating a printing quota. As of the 2013-2014 academic year, 1.8 million pages were printed on network printers at Occidental College alone. This does not adhere to the institution’s commitment to fostering a sustainable environment. Year after year, paper producers devastate the habitat of countless wildlife species and abundant forests that contribute to cleaner air. By allowing limitless printing at our school, we are allowing the destruction of 485 trees per year. It is in the institution’s best interest to reduce this figure in order to foster a better environment for the future. The ASOC Renewable Energy and Sustainability Fund will work to change the culture of paper use on Occidental’s campus and affirms Information and Technology Services’ efforts in instating a printing quota.

In solidarity,

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