

Title: Evaluating Sustainability of Purchasing Practices at Western Carolina University

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Abstract:

The University of North Carolina (UNC) system has initiated efforts to evaluate and improve the sustainability of institutional practices such as purchasing to reduce the carbon footprint at each of the individual schools. Products purchased by a university directly and indirectly affect their energy consumption through distances to a product's origin, type of product, and the degree to which a product is produced in a sustainable way. The purpose of our study was to determine the sustainability of purchasing practices at Western Carolina University (WCU). The Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System (STARS) developed by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) was used to evaluate sustainability of WCU's purchases related to computer & media and paper for the 2013-2014 academic year. Data were obtained from WCU's Purchasing Department and included information about the actual products and their origin. Results showed percentage of products purchased by WCU considered sustainable by STARS were only 10% of paper and 28% of computer-related electronics. In addition, only 27% of the purchases were from local sources. These results indicate WCU could improve sustainability of paper and computer & media purchases through greater use of local sources and purchasing more sustainable products. For example, purchasing products rated favorably through the Electronic Product Environmental Assessment Tool (EPEAT) or that are Forest Stewardship Council certified would significantly lower WCU's carbon footprint. Additionally, the small percentage of sustainable purchasing that does occur is not necessarily because the products are deemed sustainable, nor are these sustainable purchases based on campus policy. Therefore, WCU can improve sustainability of its purchase practices by educating faculty & staff and creating a policy about preferentially using suppliers who have options for local and sustainable products. Purchasing is often an area overlooked by institutions when analyzing ways to reach carbon neutrality. WCU can significantly reduce its carbon emissions by adjusting campus purchasing with the implementation of a campus wide purchasing policy and green purchasing education to meet sustainable standards.