From Threads to Treasures: The Resilient Journey of the Western Worn Community Closet

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From Threads to Treasures:
The Resilient Journey of the Western Worn Community Closet
Spring 2024
By Jessica Dietzman
Advised by Scott Linneman
Abstract:

Picture this - You are walking into a room filled with made-from-scratch clothing racks, hangers donated from the College of Business and Economics (CBE) Career Closet, clothes, shoes, and accessories filling up the shelves and racks all donated by your fellow students, professors, and faculty. You notice artwork decorating the walls designed from art students, and you have total access to any of these articles of clothing for free! This room is called the Western Worn Community Closet and written here is the resilient story of how it came to be.

*Figure 1: Sustainability Engagement Institute Room 33 before the Western Worn Community Closet was implemented.*

*Figure 2: The Western Worn Community Closet in the same SEI room 33*
Fall Quarter September 2022:

Now, let's go back two years… It's the start of my Junior Year fall quarter. I entered the classroom for a class I must take for my Business and Sustainability degree called MKTG 359, taught by professors Craig Dunn and Gigi Berardi. Little did I know this one little class would sprout an idea that would follow me until I graduate. I didn’t know anyone in that class, and I heard we had to do a group project which made me a bit nervous. We were told to develop ideas about campus sustainability and how to apply for a grant through the Sustainability, Equity, and Justice Fund (SEJF) to make beneficial changes. I had never heard of this fund before and didn't realize students could get funding to create real change. I remember hearing ideas generated by students and the professors; two interested me.

The first was a gardening idea where we would find a place on campus to plant native species, and the other was to create an inclusive clothing closet where anyone could come and get free clothes and donate their own. A fellow student, Martina Bartel, came up with the clothes closet idea but not enough people voted for it. So as a result a big group of us were put into the native plants species project. Craig and Gigi realized our group was far too large to get actual work done, so they said we should split up, and we voiced that half of us would love to do the closet idea. Those people included Maya Schrader (remember her name, she’s important), five other students, and me. This is how the original group for the Western Worn Community Closet was born.

The idea in itself seemed easy enough. We had to get a space to hold it, and the rest would come quickly. At the time, we didn’t understand how tough it was to find a space on campus. We began to scan the grant and divide the responsibilities. With a group of seven we struggled to spread out all the tasks because we realized that our primary focus needed to be the
location of the closet. We thought we could get our grant approved regardless of whether we had a space, but then realized the only likely way the grant would pass was if we had a location to put the clothes. We then decided to focus all our time on finding space. We contacted multiple departments and space managers to see if there were any openings around WWU. We spent weeks going to different spaces around campus and asking individuals if they knew anything about specific spaces and their availability. We created a WWCC email and reached out to potential stakeholders. We either got ghosted, no response, or rejections.

By the end of the quarter, we decided that there was no chance of us getting space for the time being, but we still believed this idea was important and should happen. So, we devoted our time to writing a thorough grant that detailed what would happen if we ever got a space. We thought of ideas centered around how we would collect the clothes and how we would organize our closet. We wanted our closet to be inclusive, for example not organizing by size but by type of clothing. We would have shirts all in one area and jeans in another; that is how they would be sorted, not by size or gender. We created an Instagram account (westernworncc) so that if the closet opened, we could immediately start posting about it and build student and staff awareness.

**Winter Quarter January 2023:**

During the winter quarter, the WWCC group spoke briefly about our project and grant. But since we didn't have a class where we would meet up a couple of times every week, we realized there would be little advancement in this. Maya and I were still determining if this project was feasible. We saw some promise in the future because spring quarter offered another class focused on SEJF grants. During this time, I reflected on the research that was done in the fall by the WWCC group on the fast fashion industry. This gave us motivation for why we want to continue this project.
Fast Fashion and Circular Economy:

The fashion industry produces 10% of the world's total anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions and contributes to 20% of the world's total wastewater (Cho, 2021). Adding to the concern, the United States throws away 2,150 pieces of clothing each second (Dottle and Gu, 2022). Due to the perpetuation of extremely short trend cycles, fast fashion companies are creating garments at the most expeditious rate the industry has ever seen. What does this mean? Consumers buy new pieces in extremely high volumes, and the clothes produced are low quality.

From the fast fashion industry to large designer fashion houses, many retailers use low-quality, inexpensive textiles such as polyester that release microplastics through a regular wash and wear that end up in waterways. Microplastics have been increasingly found inside the organs of animals and humans (Cho, 2021). And what happens to the pair of pants you bought at H&M three months ago that never quite fit? After clothing is donated and processed by major second-hand retailers; Value Village or Goodwill, items not sold are purchased by a third-party company and sent to countries in the Global South (Doughton, 2021). Some of the clothing is sold. However, a vast majority of 87% goes to landfills (Dottle and Gu, 2022). The issue of outsourcing our fast fashion waste is one of the primary inspirations for this project.

Just as the fashion industry exploits the environment, it also exploits humans. Notably, the fashion industry exploits women of color who are living in extreme poverty. Garment workers are taken advantage of daily internationally and in the United States. The United States is one of the largest countries where manufacturers outsource production to countries with low gross domestic products. What does this look like in practice? Take the most fatal factory accident in history, Rana Plaza in Bangladesh, a company that produced fast fashion pieces for
the world; 1,134 people were killed, and thousands more were injured in the building's collapse in 2013 (Collective Fashion Justice, N.d.).

Although it would be a fallacy to solely blame the problem on customers as opposed to corporations and late-stage capitalism, there is still action to be taken on a smaller scale. Gen-Z and Millennial consumers in the West make up a sizable chunk of fast fashion's target audience and a sizable chunk of the population at Western Washington University. Fast fashion also targets low-income individuals due to low prices and ease of purchase. College students often need significant disposable income, and fast fashion has become an easy solution for purchasing clothes.

Additionally, in college, many individuals feel freer to express their styles and identities. While this is a beautiful act, it can also make individuals feel they must consume items to create a particular image or style. An easy solution to this problem can be for-profit second-hand clothing corporations, but many are contributors to environmental degradation and environmental racism.

The WWCC offers a community solution to the problem through the clothing exchange process. While these exchanges can happen on many scales, the idea is that someone "hosts" a space for people to bring worn garments, and people can then "shop" through the newly donated clothes. This way, clothing does not end up in landfills or the problematic textile salvage economy. Especially if people take measures to recycle properly. This model of community exchange demonstrates a genuinely circular economy, where products get a second or multiuse.

Spring Quarter April 2023:

This quarter, most of the WWCC group came back together in a new Senior Capstone class, MGMT 466, taught by Craig Dunn. We added a couple of new members since we lost a
few and communicated our goals for this quarter. We wanted to focus the majority of our time on finding space. We reached out to many more people and believed this would be the time to get a yes.

The first promising place was in the VU down by the WHOLE PANTRY. Jenn Cook enlightened us that there was space there that had the potential to hold our closet. We were extremely excited as it finally seemed like things were coming together. We toured the large space, deducing that it would be appropriate for our vision.

But in the end, we received a no. The head of the Viking Union was worried about problems like lice, bedbugs, and dust and how we would combat these in our closet. We explained that we were only accepting pre-washed clothing; we would remove the donated clothes to a different area to avoid contamination and dust, and we would put in cedar blocks to
eliminate any musty smell. We hit a roadblock because the VU leadership weren’t fully confident in the idea.

This was when an idea was brought up that we should shift from getting a space on campus to creating a club on campus where members would work on this SEJF grant and try to find a space while educating themselves on fast fashion and the clothing industry. I wasn't sure about this as club funding is scarce, and there are already similar clubs out there focused on mending and sewing (Cozy Club) and climate change (Net Impact). We added this idea to our final project in this class, but most of us were unsure of the future of the WWCC.

**Summer June 2023:**

After the Spring Quarter, everyone in our group graduated except Maya and me. We didn't have a space so we couldn't apply for the grant, thus a summer of rejection. We felt defeated because we had tried many different avenues, and every road led to a no. Maya and I were waiting to see if, in the Fall, we could start over again and look for space.

Meanwhile we took off our school hats and put on our work hats. Both of us worked different jobs over the summer without checking our school emails. Ironically, we didn’t realize that sitting in our email box was an email saying there was a space for Western Worn Community Closet.

Two individuals working in the Western Hub of Living Essentials (WHOLE) reached out to us about putting clothing racks and necessities in the VU food pantry. We responded immediately and said we would love to check the space and put our clothing closet there. We were aware that this space was small, but we thought that the WHOLE could be a starter pilot so that others could see the potential of this idea and a larger space could be offered to us later.
Fall Quarter September 2023:

Maya and I got a response from Leo and Red at the start of fall quarter, stating they were open to us putting our clothing closet in the WHOLE. Over the summer, the VU overtook some new management, so there was less concern over bedbugs, lice, and other fears from the past. Maya and I were ecstatic, knowing that we could apply for the grant now that we had a space.

We started preparing our grant for submission. While we were going through this phase, Zinta Lucans (SEJF Grant Program Manager) brought up the idea of an empty room in the Sustainability Engagement Institute (SEI) in High Street Hall. She said there was a room that had not been used all last year and could be used as a permanent space for our closet. Maya and I were shocked and so happy to hear that we had space in the WHOLE and the SEI. This also made our decision more straightforward because we realized that with a permanent closet in High Street Hall, we could just put necessities in the WHOLE food pantry and use it to advertise the space in High Street Hall. This way, we would only take up a little space in the food pantry but still help them out with free necessities like bras, underwear, and socks that students could access. It was a great solution, and Maya and I were extremely excited to update our grant and add the SEI space to it.

Winter Quarter January 2024:

With this new quarter came new ideas. My advisor for this project is Dr. Scott Linneman, who initiated further ideas on how we could source our clothing racks, including his own donation of a small clothing for us to fit into our closet. Maya and I were knee-deep in the grant writing process with goals to make our closet the most sustainable and enhance this idea of a circular economy we will create with the WWCC. Dr. Linneman is familiar with the Scientific Technical Services here at Western which could make different products for students and staff
based on affiliation with the university. We contacted David Frye who responded with an encouraging email. We met up with David to discuss the sourcing of our clothing rack and he said he would love to create the clothing racks from scratch. David reuses old plywood from past projects and sources the material for his projects. Maya and I landed on investing in two clothing racks.

David’s work added to our grant because it boosted the concept of our goals for a circular economy here at WWU. David did all his labor for free; all we had to pay for was the materials, so we adjusted the budget in our grant. It looked like this:

![Figure 4: A pie chart of our budget for our SEIF grant.]

Our budget's locally sourced materials section was allocated to David's work on our clothing closets. Our budget included a "Supplemental clothing expense," allowing for purchasing infrequent clothing items (plus sizes, petite sizes, and children's clothing) at thrift stores. The point of this expense is to increase inclusivity by being able to provide all sizes, even if the likelihood of specific donations is low. The type of clothing that we will buy is based entirely on what is donated. Clothing purchasing will only happen when inventory is lacking. We hope to supply necessities like underwear, gloves, hats, socks, bras, and more in the WHOLE.
Most of our items will be sourced from second-hand stores, students, and staff, but these necessities will be new. The WHOLE food pantry has a whiteboard where students have written different ideas on what they want to see in the pantries, and one of those ideas was underwear, so we knew we would be filling a need. Our miscellaneous items included gloves, cedar wood, and shopping bags.

After finishing our grant, Zinta let Maya and me know that although we were applying for a small grant of $5,000, we would have to go through the SEJF committee. Usually, for small grants, you apply by submitting your grant to the SEJF email. Still, because we were going to be hosting our closet in the SEI, there was a conflict of interest since Lindsey Macdonald and Grace Wang (heads of SEI) were already on board to store the closet there. Because of this, we needed to present to a board of students who were impartial to our closet and unbiased. This committee usually only meets with medium and large grant groups, but we were an exception.

Maya and I spent time putting together a PowerPoint presentation to present to the SEJF committee. We were feeling nervous because if we got rejected for the grant, it would be a huge setback. We knew we had done so much prep and work, and we hoped that the SEJF committee would see our commitment to the WWCC and how significant an impact it could have at WWU. We diligently prepared a ten minute presentation.

We approached the committee expressing the potential of the grant project. We talked about eliminating fast fashion and creating a circular economy on campus. We emphasized the purpose of WWCC: to address the limited access to inclusive and affordable clothing for the Western community and combat waste resulting from the fast-fashion clothing industry. We also explained how the WWCC gives Western students, staff, and faculty a safe and accessible space to donate clothes on campus and pick up accessible and inclusive clothing for themselves. The
closet will serve Western's community as a reliable clothing resource and due to its locations the word will spread about the WHOLE and SEI Institute.

After we finished talking, the panel questioned us about how the closet would continue, how clothes would be stored, and how would responsibilities trickle down. Maya and I answered that we were searching for someone to take it over and that we had storage bins and a place inside the closet to put extra articles of clothing. We knew what we were talking about and had an answer to every question. We left feeling great about how it all went down.

The end of this quarter was about waiting. We wouldn't find out for another three weeks whether we got the grant. We checked in with our stakeholders to report the wait time. We told them the minute we knew, they would to. Finally, after the longest three weeks ever, we got an email. We got the grant!!! We couldn't believe that after a year and a half, we finally could celebrate this idea becoming a reality. We informed David to start working on the clothing racks and told Leo and Red that we would go out and buy necessities soon to be put in the WHOLE. It was a great way to end the Winter Quarter, and then Maya and I knew we would finally have the closet open at the start of the Spring Quarter!

Spring Quarter April 2024:

It's time to open the closet! Maya and I spent time prepping the closet during the first week of the spring quarter. We were still waiting to pick up the clothing racks from David and had to shop for different miscellaneous items and necessities. With the grant money, Maya and I could go shopping and spend money on items like gloves, cedar blocks, underwear, socks, bras, and other small things needed. We had told multiple people about the start of our closet Winter quarter, so I had been storing many clothes in my storage unit, manifesting that the closet would open, and we would get the grant by Spring. A student of WWU, Cole Burk, initially helped
supply many of the articles of clothing for the WWCC, contributing to have more variety of clothing and increasing inclusivity. Maya and I also initially donated many clothes to help soft launch the closet.

A considerable part of the clothing supply for the closet was Diane Flores from the Career Closet here at WWU. The Career Closet is another clothing closet here on campus focused on business attire. She helped provide the hangers for the closet and gave us hundreds of donations they didn't feel met their standards of business attire. It was an excellent way for us to have an entire closet in time for opening. We have a great connection with the Career Closet, cooperating with donations and supplies like hangers.

One of the following steps to launching the closet was postering. My sister, Maddy Dietzman, helped me create a poster for the WWCC that we wanted to have around campus since our opening day was approaching on April 15th. Once we had the design, Maya and I worked with Zinta to print out posters of varying sizes. Western Advertising Services put up some of the posters for us, and Maya and I added them to the closet area in the SEI, the food pantry area in the WHOLE, and around WWU.

![Western Worn Community Closet poster]

*Figure 5: The WWCC poster used for advertising the closet.*
David finished our clothing closets a week before opening day, so Maya and I got busy setting up shop. We decided to track how many clothes we started with and then periodically see how supply and demand interacted. We created an Excel sheet and counted the different sizes for each item in categories like pants, skirts, short sleeves, dresses, etc. Even though we tracked the clothing based on size, the whole point of our closet was to be inclusive so we wouldn’t set the clothes up that way. We sort clothes only by type rather than size and gender to promote inclusivity. We only tracked the sizing initially to ensure that we had a majority of sizes that were gender inclusive. With the help of those who donated, we had representative sizes and knew our closet could get up and running.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Started March 7th, 2024</th>
<th>Pants</th>
<th>Skirts</th>
<th>Crewneck</th>
<th>Short Sleeves</th>
<th>Long sleeves</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xsmall</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>24</td>
</tr>
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<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xLarge</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2xLarge</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3xLarge</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>49</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 6: A sample of our Excel sheet used for tracking articles of clothing.*

The Western Worn Community Closet officially opened on April 15th! It was posted on our Instagram page and many others including the SEI and WHOLE reposted it. Immediately, people were interested, and many reached out to donate. This engagement and response after all our hard work was rewarding.
With the WWCC open, Maya and I shifted our attention to the WHOLE food pantry in the VU room 435 and put necessities there. With the grant funding we went shopping to purchase new underwear, bras, and socks that would be stored in the WHOLE. We bought enough to last around a month and then returned to the store and got more. We would check in at the WHOLE food pantry every two weeks, and most of the necessities were taken every time. It was great to see the impact and that students and the WWU community were finding use in these necessities.

![Figure 7: The WHOLE food pantry in the VU room 435, drawer filled with our necessities.](image)

With the closet open officially, it was time to think about the future of it. Both being seniors Maya and I knew we needed someone to take over the WWCC for it to continue. We set out to look for interested individuals. We contacted the same class we started the project in, Craig Dunn's MKTG 359. We did a little presentation, but most of the students in the class were seniors or too busy, so no one wanted to join.
Our second attempt was Earth Week. We were asked to set up a booth at the Earth Day Fair in Red Square at WWU. We brought the two clothing racks David Frye designed filled with clothing because they were moveable and easy to transport.

![Image of clothing racks]

*Figure 8: The clothing racks created by David Frye, with WWU engraved on the handles.*

Students loved the free clothes, and we started with 350 articles of clothing in our closet; and at the end of this event, we had 100. It was amazing to see the impact of our closet. With so many students perusing, we put up a sign-up sheet for those interested in getting involved. Around twelve students signed the sheet, and we emailed them; one responded that they wanted to help take over the closet. It was a weight off of our shoulders that someone would take it over.

The joy of this project was collaborating. I know that I wouldn’t have been able to do this without such a smart, reliable individual that is Maya. I am in a Climate Leadership Cohort here
at Western, and this closet was my also my Senior project. I assumed someone in the upcoming cohort would want to take over the closet as their potential senior project. Launching the closet with large groups and focusing on too many stakeholders took a lot of work, so the people taking over needed to know how to communicate well and work with each other. So, I reached out to the new Climate Leadership Cohort, and one of them wanted to take it over. Now Maya and I have two individuals who wish to join the WWCC and take it on a new journey. We have been passing on our knowledge to them, sharing ideas we have of what they could do with the closet.

One idea is student employment and applying for another grant to have a student get paid to come in once a week or so and organize the closet. We also wanted to connect with a local nonprofit called Ragfinery in Bellingham. Ragfinery takes used textiles and recycles and reuses them. Ultimately this would be a best practice for left over clothing. The Career Closet works with Ragfinery so we could extend this connection to WWCC. Lastly, we thought about expanding the closet to a different location or other food pantries to increase accessibility. All these are just ideas, but it's nice to know that we have two motivated students who we believe will do what is best for the closet now that we are giving them the reigns.

Our closet continued to be successful for the rest of the spring quarter, with lots of traction and people hearing about it via our social media posts. Even the Western Front posted an article about us. We got more donations, and the demand was high! Overall, we measured that around 30 articles of clothing were taken and donated every two weeks, which is fantastic! After a long and resilient journey, Maya and I now leave our closet in the hands of new individuals, having gained many skills together and hoping others will carry on our legacy here at Western Washington University.
References


Accessed 28 May 2024.
