

An Investigation into the UBC Free Store

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ABSTRACT

The UBC Free Store is a volunteer effort that aims to sustainably develop and diversify the campus economy. The ability for customers to obtain for free the donated goods serves to redirect these goods more effectively in terms of need and scarcity. Another objective of the store is to reduce waste. Lastly, the operation augments the climate of trade at UBC, and equips students, faculty and visitors with an option beyond maximizing profit. In light of this intention and statistics gathered in the investigation, the qualitative estimate can be made that the existence of a Free Store on UBC campus carries positive externalities.

The context of the investigation is that of a very young project; the “infrastructure” of the organization is in its infancy in terms of permanent residence, volunteer numbers, reputation, and support. The goals included trying to build these fundamental parameters by providing recommendations based on evidence from an engineering perspective. Statistics gathered on the preceding topics, as well as field trips to existing stores were conducted. Research into existing free stores’ models of sustainability were compared with what is feasible for the UBC group to implement.

A list of recommendations was compiled in summary of the potential additions the results of the investigation suggest are feasible. The critical suggestions being towards furthering the awareness of the program through advertising, events, and other forms of community involvement, including mutual endorsement with other sustainable programs in the school. Some examples of this include become affiliated with student teams or other lines of funding, which will hopefully provide this group with the agency to sustain their organization. Recommendations were made towards some of the group’s internal organization based on other free store models. Lastly, a way in which this group can utilize technology to their benefit is to employ a digital tool such as the internet. Between ledgering the content they are redirecting, advertising, linking themselves to other groups/events, or using the net as a tool to help get the things to people who need it most, there is a plenty of room for organization on this front.

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background

A free store is a store where people can donate items they no longer need and others can take items they need for free. The free store hopes to reduce consumption and increase the lifetime of items before going to the landfill. It is formed based on the idea that it would reduce the waste from throwing away still usable items that come from a consumerist society and in helping student's financial situation by providing a way to obtain important needs (Commonenergyubc, 2015).

Free stores are a less commonly seen continuation of the phenomenon of thrift stores or charity shops. Thrift stores first started appearing in the early 1900's as a way to collect used goods from wealthier residents and redistribute them to the city's more needy inhabitants. The thrift store faced opposition throughout the early days of its inception but gained immense popularity by first appealing to the altruism of the population and later on the realization of environmental stewardship that came with the advent of large-scale commercial production (Zotte 2013). Free stores are different from thrift stores in that they do not charge money for the goods that people take from them which creates a different set of challenges from running a thrift shop. On the other hand, there are still many similarities between the two types of stores. They both rely on donations of individuals to provide the goods which they sell and that they share the same basic goals of helping them of the community and reducing waste.

1.2 Current Free Store at UBC

The UBC Free store is a very new establishment on the UBC campus. Its purpose is to accept items from donors and distribute these to anyone who would like them free of charge. The current UBC free store is a continuation of the free store that was organized in 2013 and is an organization under the Student Environment Center. With a major portion of its volunteers and organizers leaving during before the school year, the free store reorganized at the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year. It is entirely run by volunteers and does not have any sources of funding, relying on a free space located basement of the Student Union Building as the location of the free store. Most of the information about events are transmitted through a facebook page.



Figure 1: UBC Free in the old Student Union Building basement

1.3 Objectives

The goal of this project is to provide suggestions to improve the UBC Free Store. This project will provide recommendations to improve the free store's space, image, sustainability, community involvement, organization and awareness around campus. Information about free stores was obtained from online literature sources, looking at other existing free stores, interviewing one of the organizers of the Galiano Island free store, and an online survey.

2.0 Literature Review

While there have been some academic studies conducted on thrift shops, much less has been conducted on the workings of free stores. The similarities between free stores and thrift stores make studies conducted on the latter a valuable resource.

In “Charity shops as second-hand markets”, Chattoe provides an analysis on the different ways that charity shops differ from first hand shops and how these differences have implications on how they should be modeled for analysis. The ways they differ include the fact that they are staffed by volunteers, they have less control over their products as they do not come from producers but instead comes from consumers, and they much less specialized than other types of second-hand shops. It also looks at the impacts of these differences respect to the store, staff, donors, and customers (Chattoe, 2000). This paper provides some ideas at what the social and economic impacts of free stores are.

One topic that was explored was the motivation behind donations and the patterns in donation. According to one study, the main driving force for disposal of clothes is the need to create space and the decision to discard or donate is based on the sense of guilt and the sense of social responsibility (Ha-Brookshire, 2008). The same study also found that the ease of donating also played an important role in determining whether an individual donated. This information is important in the analysis of ways to improve the free store because it gives us certain factors, namely the ease of donation, which can be improved upon to increase donations.

There is also a study that researches the difference between different demographics that purchased second hand clothing (Cervellon, 2012). This paper explored the idea of vintage fashion and second-hand fashion as two different demographics getting second hand clothing and having two different motivation, namely nostalgia and concern for uniqueness as opposed to frugality. From this information, it is possible branding "second-hand" to "vintage" can result in a different demographic of interested people and in rebranding UBC Free Store can potentially create more interest in the store. Another paper that looked at different demographics showed that the environmentally aware, those who have a positive attitude towards recycling, are more likely to give away or donate clothes (Bianchi, 2010). This study suggests that by promoting awareness of the UBC free store and the benefits of allowing item reuse through the store will make people more likely to donate to the store.

In addition to peer review papers, previous seed reports conducting social, economic, and environmental analysis on items that are currently accepted or could possibly be accepted in the future for the free store was also reviewed. Seed reports that were referenced include “*Formal Wear Rental At The UBC Bookstore: A Triple Bottom Line Feasibility Report*” and “*Furniture Reuse Enterprise*” which provided important insight into the different effects that can arise from providing alternatives for the student body to obtain items other than purchasing them from retailers.

3.0 Impacts of Free Stores

3.1 Social Impacts

One of the major goals of a free store is to raise awareness about sustainability. It educates the public that there is an alternative to throwing items in the landfill. Because of this, a free store allows individuals with similar thoughts about sustainability to connect. Recycling becomes a group activity rather than a private one and as a result it becomes more exciting to participate. Through raising awareness, using second-hand items also becomes more socially acceptable and trendy instead of looked down upon.

3.2 Environmental Impacts

Free stores provide many positive environmental impacts. Since a lot of items are sent to the free store and reused instead of put in the garbage, less garbage goes into the landfill. Reduction in waste also leads to less harmful carbon emissions into the air.

3.3 Economic Impacts

In its own small way, a free store helps relocate wealth. While this is not the primary goal of every free store, a free store allows people with less money to get items for free. On the other hand, if more people reuse items, it can lead to less sales for many companies. For example, clothes are one of the most popular items in free stores and if more people reused clothes, it can lead to less sales for clothing companies. Also, if less waste is sent to waste management systems, it can potentially lead to a loss of jobs for employees of these waste management systems.

3.4 Impacts on Small Island Community

During the research for this report Linda Rudrick, a member of a small community on Galiano island, was interviewed. Linda helped set up and organize the free store on Galiano island. "The free store is an important part of the community. It [the free store] contributes to the health and well being of the islanders" Linda said. The free store on Galiano operates similar to a thrift store but with no funds being exchanged for the items. It gets its money from government grants and silent auctions of large new items. The money collected goes to up keeping the space and now even paying the volunteers. There is also a donation jar at the door for people to donate if they like. "Even though everything is free, people still like to donate a couple of bucks. We want our free store to always be here". The free store on Galiano is also called the redirectory, similar to the one on Hornby island. "People drop off what they don't want any more or can't use and we find it a good home". I asked Linda if anyone ever abuses the system she

said “there is always a few bad apples” but in a whole it is only a positive place for the community. Similar to the bakery or the market the free store seemed to be a place for people to come on a Saturday and catch up on the local island news, see some friends and perhaps find a treasure. I asked Linda if she thought the free store was a necessity or just a novelty or trend. She said “the free store is a vital member of the community”.

4.0 Issues with the UBC Free Store

Through interviews, surveys, and visiting the UBC Free Store space, we discovered a lot of issues which limit the free store's potential impact on the community. Some issues with the UBC Free Store in the realm of awareness/visibility include, but are not limited to a lack of website, no clear organization of the space or store, no advertising, no store promotion plan. There is also only a marginal use of social media, in that there is none avenue (Facebook) and the group has not been attached to similarly minded organizations or spread around with intention to increase use among students. Furthermore, as could be implemented with the website, there is a difficulty in processing large things such as furniture, since people are less inclined to move large things for uncertain transactions. If the store could be set up virtually, too, these transactions could be organized beforehand and facilitated by the store in forum/re-post style.

Some issues in the realm of sustainability include limited research into other free store models. In terms of securing funding to continue operations there is neither small scale nor large scale catchment. For instance, plenty of non-profit organizations make use of donation, utilizing the public's support for the organization. On the other hand, the relatively new group running the store have yet to look into more impactful sources of funding such as grants or scholarships, which are abound for groups that fall under the "sustainable" umbrella. Finally, although the store's primary purpose to provide items for free, several other free stores use the silent auction for more expensive items as a way to both produce money and attract some attention towards what they're accomplishing. This is justified in that the exchange of money ultimately makes the benefits of the free store running possible.

In terms of internal organization, [REDACTED]. This could matter for the organization in the future as they try to secure a place on campus, obtain funding, establish communication with the UBC community/other groups, or maintain functional operations. For instance, there was little to no active recruiting of volunteers. Another organizational issue was that the group is still technically a part of the Student Environment Center, [REDACTED]. Internally, there was little schedule, goals, or overall mission leading such decisions, such that if new members or leadership stepped in there would be volatility in the operations.

Lastly, a few tangible things that are currently missing from the organization include but are not limited to: a lack of a bid for e-waste, and a lack of a tracking system for items they've processed. The tracking system is known to be a useful piece of of an organization in not only assessing internally how the group is progressing but justifying to others, such as those that allocate space and/or funding, that the group is worthwhile existing.

4.1 Lack of Awareness

While trying to collect data from students about their experiences with the UBC Free Store, we quickly realized that most people don't even know what the free store is. We surveyed

36 UBC students through an online survey. Below is a summary of the questions which were asked and the responses:

1. Do you know what a free store is?
 - Yes: 28
 - No: 8
2. Have you heard about the UBC free store?
 - Yes: 6
 - No: 30
3. How did you hear about the UBC free store?
 - Online article: 3
 - Friend: 1
 - Don't remember: 2
4. Have you ever used the UBC free store?
 - Took an item: 1
 - Donated an item: 1
 - Visited but didn't take or donate: 2
 - No: 2

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The UBC Free Store currently faces numerous challenges. Being one of the newer SEED's initiatives, the structure and organization are less than ideal. Lack of awareness from the student body, as well as lack of communication between the Free Store and other campus organizations are two key problems which should be addressed.

While there are still issues, the overall concept of free stores is a valuable approach in working towards sustainability culture within the university. In addition to the challenges mentioned above, if the goals of reducing waste and consumption, promoting a community-held economy, and redistributing goods effectively are further focused upon through active student participation and greater organization, the UBC Free Store will be much more effective.

Through researching peer-reviewed papers and conducting a small scale survey, our team constructed some possible courses of action to further the UBC Free Store's objectives. The first suggested course of action is to raise awareness of the free store by advertising. Advertising can be done at almost no cost through newsletters, social media, events, and posters. There are many newsletters from other campus groups that promote sustainability who would be willing to write about the UBC Free Store. Many students try to find places to volunteer throughout the year so advertising this opportunity would help get more volunteers on board. There are also numerous Facebook groups related to student teams that promote sustainability. Getting in contact with some of them to advertise the UBC Free Store would be a good idea. Lastly, posters can be setup at many locations throughout the campus such as at student residences and presentations and booths can be setup at UBC-wide events and fairs.

The second suggested course of actions is to better organize the team and the space. Improve the signage and shelving in the current location and possibly add a bulletin board for posting larger items such as fridges and couches. Keep track of volunteers and follow up with them occasionally to engage with them and guide them so they won't just quit in a few weeks. Also consider partnering with UBC housing to increase donations by adding donation bins in residence buildings. At the end of the school year when people are moving out, it will be easier for students to donate their items that they were planning on throwing away.

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