

# Best Practices in Green Purchasing Services

*Summary by Matthew Eckelman*

## *Panelists*

**Chantal Line Carpentier**, *Head, Environment, Economy and Trade Program, Commission for Environmental Cooperation*

**John Turenne**, *President, Sustainable Food Systems, LLC*

**Corinna Lowe**, *Green Mountain College '07*

## *Moderator*

**Jacob Park**, *Assistant Professor of Business and Public Policy, Green Mountain College\**

\*Workshop Organizer

Professor Park launched the session by calling on the workshop participants to consider three overarching questions as the discussion proceeded:

1. In order to have effective green purchasing programs, what do we need to know about purchasing in general?
2. What are the challenges, opportunities, and trends specific to green purchasing?
3. How do we as practitioners begin to operationalize green purchasing initiatives?

## **THE NORTH AMERICAN GREEN PURCHASING INITIATIVE**

Chantal Line Carpentier described the work of her organization, the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) and the North American Green Purchasing Initiative (NAGPI). NAGPI was negotiated by the three NAFTA countries and began operation in 2002.

In terms of purchasing, the most important thing to realize is that governments are responsible for the consumption of about 30 percent of global GDP in terms of products and services – a huge percentage. Green purchasing initiatives have proliferated, but there is much duplication and no emerging standards thus far. The hope of NAGPI was to act as an umbrella organization to allow for exchange of best practices and general information. They have developed an online tool called ECO S.A.T. (Self-Assessment Tool), which can be used by different types of organizations to

assess quantitatively their own green purchasing programs. A limited number of universities have joined NAGPI and Dr. Carpentier encouraged attendants to review the website ([www.cec.org/nagpi](http://www.cec.org/nagpi)) and possibly join.

## **GREEN PURCHASING ON CAMPUS**

Professor Park spoke more specifically about the role of green purchasing in campus sustainability programs. There are a number of benefits that universities gain from pursuing green purchasing: economic benefits, good public relations, and competitive advantage through innovation, which is perhaps the most important but least concrete. Martin Akel and Associates completed a study recently entitled “Institutions of Higher Education: A Study of Facilities and Environmental Considerations” that surveyed 470 colleges and universities in the United States on their environmental programs. Some of the most important results include:

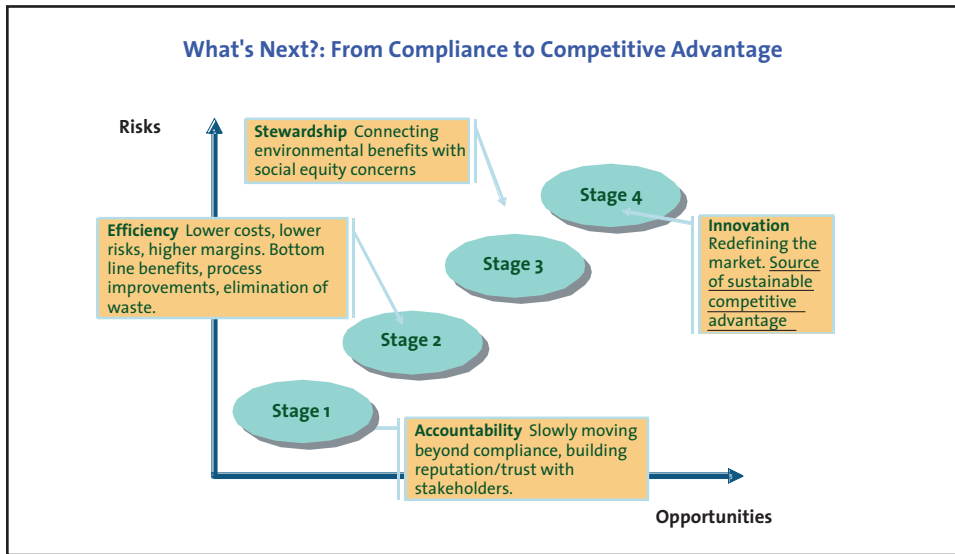
- Two-thirds of those surveyed want some sort of green purchasing program.
- 90 percent are incorporating sustainability considerations into new projects.
- 90 percent are examining and trying to reduce their use of consumable products.
- Three-quarters are considering LEED certification.

With these high numbers, any educational institution that is ignoring environmental considerations in its purchasing will be seen as behind the ball. Sustainability programs have become mainstream very quickly over the past few years, and many previously “green” initiatives are now considered to be normal operating procedure.

Some successful programs include Cornell’s sustainable computing initiative, in which almost 95 percent of computers discarded by the university departments are reused. Cornell purchases only those computers and peripherals that have Energy Star or Electronic Product Environmental Assessment Tool (EPEAT) certification. Both Florida State University and the University of Pennsylvania have excellent green energy programs, encouraging energy efficiency, conservation, and purchasing of green power. Many universities are now buying “sustainable food,” which is usually locally-grown organic produce.

Figure 1 depicts a series of steps that programs can take toward the end goal of sustainable purchasing. In their early stages, green purchasing programs at educational institutions can move from accountability and compliance activity to achieving real benefits through increased efficiency. Later, as these programs mature, they can assume a stewardship role by reflecting a college or university’s responsibility to social equity issues. Eventually, green purchasing programs can become a source of competitive advantage, incorporating academic aspects into their programs. The risks (and changes required of purchasing departments) increase as green purchasing programs move through these stages, but so do opportunities for improved savings, efficiency, reputation, morale, and most importantly, teaching and learning.

Figure 1 Green Purchasing Hierarchy



**PROCURING FOOD SUSTAINABLY ON CAMPUS**

Looking at a specific group of products, namely food, Mr. Turenne, a professional chef, discussed his experience with the Yale Sustainable Food Project and with other educational institutions. In examining sustainable food systems, one must realize that good food is not just about the bottom line. Sourcing food has consequences for social systems, the local economy, and nutrition. In order to elucidate this point, Mr. Turenne offered a snack of pears, cheese, and honey, all produced within 20 miles of Yale. He then led the group through a visualization exercise, describing how farmers and animals in our community produced the food, encouraging the group to savor the flavor and the history of the food. It was delicious! During the exercise he said, “I want you to understand the story behind what’s on your tongue.”

Mr. Turenne sees sustainable food as that produced by small to midsize farmers who are committed to the vitality of the land and their workers, sourced as locally as possible, and prepared in ways that respect quality and freshness. This last point is often overlooked and is perhaps the most important to him as a professional chef.

In Mr. Turenne’s experience, sustainable food initiatives tend to arise from student demand or from a top-down decision made by administrations. At Yale, the impetus came from celebrity chef Alice Waters, whose daughter studied there as an undergraduate. Initiatives that are begun through a combination of students, administration, and outside interests (such as parents or local farmers) will have the greatest chance of success.

The benefits of a sustainable food system are many. First, locally sourced food does not have to be transported very far, which conserves fuel resources. The average meal in the United States travels 1500 miles from the farm to the table! Buying sustainable

food helps support the local economy and is generally unprocessed, making scraps ideal for composting. Most importantly, though, sustainable food is fresh, nutritious, and satisfying to the people who eat it. Mr. Turenne closed his presentation with a quote by Fred Kirschenmann, a leader in the sustainable agriculture movement:

Human health cannot be maintained apart from eating healthy, nutritious food . . . which can also not be achieved apart from maintaining healthy soil, clean water, and healthy plants and animals.

### **FIVE FARMS IN FIVE DAYS**

Ms. Lowe worked with Mr. Turenne on a sustainable food project at Green Mountain College, where she is an undergraduate. She presented to the group the story of the project, “5 farms in 5 days”. The project grew out of a class at Green Mountain College and was funded by the Student Campus Greening Fund, a student-run organization supported by student activity fees. The goals of the project were to:

- increase awareness of food sustainability issues;
- demonstrate student support for local food;
- contribute to the local economy.

After consultation with the food services vendor, other students, faculty, and Mr. Turenne, a menu was created that featured the food of one local farm for each of five days during one week. The meals were widely publicized on campus. In order to ease the burden of a new menu on the food services vendor, Ms. Lowe and other students managed all of the food purchasing and participated in some of the prep work in the kitchens. Student feedback was quite positive, with many going back for seconds and asking whether sustainable food would be a permanent option at the college.

Future projects should incorporate some of the lessons learned from the project, which Ms. Lowe calls “the five legs of a sustainability dining table.”

1. It is necessary to source food from farms with enough volume. One farm ran out of produce at a critical time, which caused some problems for the project.
2. Brokers or “food foragers” are extremely helpful in sourcing food among small producers, as well as building relationships with many parties. Food can be ordered from the broker, who can then aggregate produce from various sources.
3. It is helpful to have a flexible menu in order to adapt to any last-minute problems that may occur.
4. Trained prep assistance relieves some of the extra burden of work from a new menu on the food services vendor, and was particularly helpful in this case in building support for the project.

5. Campus community support, in the form of student groups, faculty, and staff buy-in.

Professor Park closed the session with the hope (and prediction) that green or sustainable purchasing will eventually become mainstream, so that it will lose its qualifier and simply become institutionalized as an integral aspect of purchasing.

