

# **Bottled Water Campaign at Macalester College: A Case Study**

## **Clare Pillsbury**

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## **Introduction**

Students at Macalester College have discussed bottled water bans since student Liz Larson first brought up the issue in 2008. In January of 2010, I began my job as the sustainability procurement research assistant at Macalester College. During my first meeting with my boss, the director of purchasing, Kathleen Johnson, she asked me what my interests in terms of sustainability were. As I had written a paper the previous semester on water scarcity and subsequent management efforts, I told her that I was interested in bottled water awareness. From then on, I was charged with the task of promoting a policy that would discontinue the purchase of bottled water on campus. The following case study is a narrative of how I was able to accomplish this goal, what the challenges were, and what the applications are for other schools interested in promoting this policy are.

## **The Logistics of Passing the Policy**

For the policy to be implemented, it had to be able to pass through two committees: the Macalester Sustainability Advisory Committee and the Macalester Social Responsibility Committee. Once recommended by both committees, it would be sent to the college President for final approval. This was unique in the sense that it was the first policy to go through the relatively new Sustainability Advisory Committee at Macalester.

## **Timeline of the Movement**

The first priority in any initiative for change is research and brainstorming. Using examples from other higher education institutions and the responsible purchasing network, I gained basic information that would help me to plan out the campaign at Macalester College to be as successful as possible. The questions that guided my research were the same as those that guide this case study report:

- \*What a bottled water free policy looks like for a higher education institution?
- \* How to accomplish the goal of implementing a bottled water free policy?
- \*What were the challenges in implementing a bottled water policy and how were they dealt with?

This research continued into February and most of March. In April, surveys were sent out to students and college departments. The purpose of these surveys was to gauge the level of support of students, staff, and faculty for a future bottled water free policy and what their concerns would be if it were to be implemented. These were particularly useful as they allowed me to use this as evidence for student, staff, and faculty support of the policy. It also allowed me to be able to address what were the chief concerns about discontinuing bottled water on campus using both innovative thinking as well as examples from other higher level institutions that had dealt with the same concerns.

After accumulating all this research, I was able to formulate a bottled water free policy as well as

an implementation plan that I presented to the Sustainability Advisory Committee in late April. The first draft of the policy was initially intended to discontinue only the sale of bottled water on campus and use in catering events. However, the Sustainability Advisory Committee rejected this initial policy in favor of a stronger policy that would include discontinuing the use of campus funds to purchase bottled water. They also made some minor adjustments to the implementation plan I had submitted, primarily involving a greater need to educate students on the economic, social, and environmental consequences of bottled water before the passage of any bottled water free policy.

The summer of 2010 I stayed in Saint Paul and continued the work on Macalester's bottled water policy. My focus for the months of June, July, and August were to look at implementing more tap water alternatives on campus. Therefore, I worked closely with the Director of Facilities Services, Bon Appetit Manager (dining services), and the Manager of the Highlander Store to determine the best way in which to ease the transition to a more tap water dependent campus. My goal in working with facilities was to strengthen the tap water infrastructure on campus by putting in more drinking fountains, improving existing ones, and retrofitting more drinking fountains with bottle fillers. This entailed doing a complete survey of all the drinking fountains on campus. I gathered information on: where each drinking fountain was located, what shape each drinking fountain was in, and if they contained a water bottle filler. This information was eventually used to determine areas in which to install drinking fountains in the future as well as determine which drinking fountains needed to be repaired and retrofitted with water bottle fillers.

In working with the Bon Appetit Manager, I wanted to focus on brainstorming ways in which to compensate for any decrease in sales that may occur were the college to go bottled water free. Eventually, the Bon Appetit Manager and I decided that we would add more healthy drinks to the menu in order to compensate for people not being able to buy bottled water. The use of the water cambros in the campus center would also continue to provide students with water. Because Bon Appetit is also in charge of catering, we also agreed that catering would eliminate bottled water for all their events and substitute healthy drinks such as bottled water and vitamin water in the pack out lunches they provide. Overall, they were very accommodating to integrating a bottled water free policy into their services, as long as the college was willing to work with them to determine alternatives.

While working with Bon Appetit and Facilities Services, I also worked to increase the sales of water bottles on campus. After designing a new water bottle design with the help of a local printer, I set out to increase both the amount of water bottles that were sold on campus as well as the locations in which they were sold. This I did by increasing the locations where water bottles were sold to include not only the Highlander Store but also the Grill and the fitness center. The water bottles that were not being sold, were given to the incoming first years as a way in which to increase their awareness of the college's commitment to discontinuing bottled water.

The water bottles were also a way in which to celebrate a bottled water free orientation week. Along with giving out free water bottles, we strategically placed cambros filled with ice water at various locations on campus. Cambros were filled by student volunteers and compostable cups were placed by the cambros in case a student forgot to bring their water bottle with them. That week provided a great opportunity to educate students about the social, economic, and

environmental impacts of bottled water, which was a crucial part of the educational component of the implementation plan.

In continuing with the theme of education, I spent most of fall semester 2010 preparing for bottled water awareness month in February with the bottled water task force. Eventually we narrowed down a wide array of possibilities of to a few ones that we knew would be high impact. The line up for Bottled Water Month was determined to be a screening of the documentary “Tapped”, a talk by Elizabeth Royte, author of the Bottlemania, and numerous tabling events and tap water challenges. We also worked on incorporating stronger language into the Macalester Bottled Water Policy in order to present it to the Sustainability Advisory Council in November. The revised policy included both discontinuing the purchasing of bottled water with Macalester Funds as well as an ongoing educational component.

The results of our planning aligned fairly well with our goals. There was a decent turnout for both the movie screening as well as to Elizabeth Royte’s talk. The tap water challenges were also a good way to create campaign visibility and made students more aware of the myths surrounding bottled water. Bottled water companies have centered their advertising around the myth the bottled water is “better tasting” and “more pure” than tap water. These taste tests aim to draw attention to this myth by demonstrating that most people can’t tell the difference between bottled and tap water. Most of the taste tests were done a few days before big events in order to gain more publicity for the event. This worked out well as many of the students who were intrigued by the results of the taste test showed interest in attending these larger events. Additional educational tools used were informational pamphlets on the impact of bottled water and buttons which stated “Water: I’d tap that.” Overall, our educational campaign in February was a success. Although attendance at the events was not as high as I had originally pictured, the issues surrounding bottled became more visible on campus, which was our main goal.

The final push in the campaign came during the summer of 2011 when the college formed their own bottled water task force, which served to carry out the final implementation pieces in my absence. Thanks to the hard work of this task force, the Macalester Bottled Water Policy was passed through the Social Responsibility Committee and on the President, who signed it into effect on September 1, 2011.

## **Lessons Learned**

Overall, the campaign was a success. The policy got passed without too much opposition from either the students or the staff. However, there were several ways in which we could have strengthened both the campaign for and the implementation of this policy.

### What went well

One of the key aspects to a successful campaign is timing. The campaign to promote the Macalester bottled water policy came at a time when both the student body and the staff were receptive to this kind of reform. We had fairly little resistance to the policy, and for the most part were able to satisfactorily address what few concerns there were. Facilities and food services were also receptive to working with me to implement the policy, which also made things

easier.

Another key aspects to a successful campaign is conducting research. Because Macalester was one of the first schools to go bottled water free, I conducted a lot of research before writing the first draft of the policy. This was helpful as it allowed me to investigate actions taken by other schools to see which tactics were successful and could be used at Macalester. The survey I conducted of the students and faculty were also helpful as I used them to demonstrate the support of students and staff for the policy. I also was able to use them to identify any concerns about implementing a bottled water policy.

## **What could have gone better**

Although the campaign was successful, there were aspects of it that could have gone smoother. It would have been easier and more efficient to have a larger task force. This could have been prevented if I had done a better job of recruiting people to join the task force. An additional obstacle was the implementation of filters and retrofitting drinking fountains in a timely manner.

- The education campaign could have been stronger. The issue of bottled water was made more prevalent on campus during freshman orientation as well as during the educational campaign put on in February. However, we could have done a better job of increasing visibility at other times during the year.

## **Campaign Issues**

During the course of the campaign there were a few issues that we had to address. The issues and their resolutions are listed below.

### *1. Should Macalester discontinue the use of bottled water coolers as well as the smaller individual bottles?*

In determining the language of the Macalester Bottled Water Policy, we debated whether to just include small, individualized water bottles or whether to also include the larger bottled water coolers. Because it will be a while before the tap water infrastructure will be upgraded to handle the full demands of the Macalester Community, we will be placing bottled water coolers in strategically pre-determined areas.

### *2. Bottled water at events:*

We ran into issues with supplying water at larger college events. While individual bottles of water will be discontinued, the big coolers will continue to be used for larger events on the condition that we continue to look for an alternative to implement once the coolers are included in the bottled water policy. No individual bottles of water will be given out or sold at these events.

### *3. Bottled water use in athletics:*

The solution to this issue was resolved by Laurie Hamre, the dean of students at Macalester College. A concern expressed by the athletics department is that since bottled water is the main product sold at the concessions stands, a discontinuation of sales would reduce the amount of money taken in. As sports teams are given a percentage of the profits, the money they receive would in turn decrease. In working with the head of the athletic department, Laurie was able to come up with the innovative solution of selling reusable Macalester water bottles at the concession stands for only \$3.00. Thus far, we have received a positive response by customers.

### *4. Bottled Water use in Admissions and President's Office:*

Perhaps the biggest concern that was expressed was the inability to provide bottled water for visiting students and distinguished guests. The solution was to give reusable Macalester water bottles to visiting families and guests and allow departments to keep water coolers to use

### *5. Some departments concerned about lack of access to drinkable water*

One of the concerns addressed in the survey that was sent out to the staff and faculty was a lack of access to drinkable water. Many department heads stated that there was no nearby tap water source and therefore, they had to purchase a bottled water cooler. We approached this concern by conducting a survey of all the tap water resources on campus, which we then used to determine the proximity of departments to a tap water resource. Whether a department would be continued to be provided with a bottled water cooler would be contingent with whether they were designated to be in low, medium, or high proximity to a tap water resource. The departments located in low to medium proximity of tap water resources would continue to be provided with a bottled water cooler while those in high proximity areas would have to cover the cost of a cooler themselves. Once more tap water resources are installed so that all departments were in at least medium proximity areas, the college will stop covering the cost of the bottled water coolers in order to discourage departments from using them. Finally, once the last stage of the policy is enacted where the college will discontinue with the purchasing of all bottled water, the departments will be required to cease purchasing of bottled water coolers.

## Appendix

### **i. Timeline of Events**

#### January 2010:

- Began work as sustainability student worker

#### February 2010:

- Used RPN site for guidance
- Used other schools as examples
- Looked for alternatives

#### March 2010:

- Used RPN site for guidance
- Used other schools as examples
- Looked for alternatives

April 2010:

- Sent out surveys to students and departments
- Gathered information and decided how to address student and staff concerns
- Looked up sample policies to determine correct wording
- Finished writing Macalester Bottled Water Policy
  - \*Presented Macalester Bottled Water Policy to Sustainability Advisory Committee

June, July, August 2010

- Drinking Fountains: Drinking Fountain Inventory
- Drinking Fountains: Decided on priority drinking fountain areas
- Drinking Fountains: Had Gooseneck water bottle fillers installed
- Helped to plan a bottled water free move-in day
- Helped distribute free water bottles to all incoming freshmen
- Continued to research how to address student and staff concerns
  - \* Continued to research other schools

Fall 2010:

- Revised bottled water policy
- Planned for bottled water awareness month

Spring 2011:

- February = bottled water awareness month
- March & April: Revised policy and sent through SAC and SRC

September 2011:

- Bottled water policy passed