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Boxed Water Project Summary

Out with the Bottle, In with the Box

Around 30 million plastic water bottles are consumed in the United States each year, and around 80% of those end up in a landfill or in the ocean. Last year, the average American used 167 disposable water bottles, but only around 38 disposable water bottles were recycled. After performing research on our campus, we concluded that the excessive use of plastic increased our carbon footprint and contributed to the degradation of the environment. The current environmental sustainability plan at Minnesota State University, Mankato is lacking a section addressing the excessive plastic use and waste on campus. We decided to address this issue by formulating a campaign to bring boxed water on campus as an alternative to single use plastic bottled water. During this campaign, we utilized the concepts of spheres of influence, communicative rationality, and mobilizing structures to establish this campaign on campus and to make boxed water a reality in the near future.

To begin our campaign, we needed to develop a collective action frame. All collective action frames have three steps/parts to them. They start with the interpretation of what is going on and finding out what the problem is, so you can figure out how to fix it. Next, is the solution to what should be done about the problem. This is where the movement starts to create their collective action to combat a common problem among a group of people. Lastly, the collective action frame must provide motivation. It must provide motivation to get people to act, use tactics or tell stories about the movement to encourage current and future supporters to contribute to the actions for change in a social movement. The most important step was to address the issue we faced on our campus. This issue is the excessive use and sale of single use plastic water bottles, when many of these bottles are not being recycled properly or at all. To address this issue, we established a boxed water campaign. This campaign included an online and written petition to gather supporters, and a letter being sent to Sodexo. Sodexo is the main food and beverage distributor on campus, which is the entity that we need to contact to make this change. For the written petition, we gathered signatures by tabling in the Centennial Student Union. Another important step is to inform the University Dining Services of our campaign and schedule a meeting to gain their insight and support. Lastly, we want our campaign to continue to grow and provide motivation for people on campus to join our cause. The issue of excessive plastic use is one that affects every individual across the world. The negative effects that plastic has on the environment can be seen in examples such as the Pacific Garbage Patch, animals consuming plastic products, and the harmful BPA and BSA molecules that we ingest on a daily basis.

The purpose of our action was to gather support, inform, and educate individuals on campus and in our community. The intended audience of our action is a combination of other activists, bystanders, sympathizers, and opponents who can help make a change happen. Activists, bystanders, and sympathizers can include students, faculty and staff on campus and in the Mankato community. The opponents who can help facilitate change may include University Dining Services representatives, Sodexo entities, and people who do not believe this is a necessary change for our campus. The overall goal of our action was to bring boxed water as a new and alternative way to consume water. The short-term goals of our action included raising awareness and gaining support from people around campus. Also, we wanted to send a letter to Sodexo with the support of University Dining Services.

As a group, we recognized that our campus has implemented changes to address the carbon footprint of our university. They have implemented the Public Buildings Enhanced Energy Efficiency Program, Dining Center Composting, Green Transportation Fee, and much more. Although these changes have been implemented, the campus has not addressed the use of plastic on campus in the Centennial Student Union or other dining services locations. We strategically chose to implement this action because we felt that people were unaware of the existence of a product such as boxed water. This is where our campus and community mobilizing structures helped make our campaign stronger. Mobilizing structures are already existing organizations that are present among the community that want change. They provide membership, leadership, and communication to the movement. Some mobilizing structures that we had on campus that helped us with the campaign were MSSA, green campus environmental committees and our social change class. They provided us with different avenues to take action around campus and gave our campaign room to grow. Through the help of our mobilizing structure and hard work the campaign was able to become visible to students, faculty, and staff through the use of a written and online petition.

One social movement theory that we learned in class that supports the action we took in achieving our goals was Resource Mobilization Theory. Resource Mobilization Theory argues that success of social movements depends on resources (time, money, skills) and the ability to use them. This theory was a breakthrough study of social movements because it focused on variables that are sociological rather than psychological. This theory supports the actions that we chose to achieve our goals because when dealing with a strict structure inside our university we needed resources like skills, time, money, communication and personal connections to build up our campaign and be taken seriously by the higher structures on campus. The resources time, skills and personal connections/communication helped us the most in reaching the goals of our collective action frame. With the help of using our research we were able to establish what the issue (excessive use of plastic on our campus) was. Our personal skills and communication were essential in working together to bring all our ideas in on the campaign and work toward our solution of bringing boxed water to our campus and schedule a meeting with University Dining Services to make it possible. Lastly, time was an essential resource we need to use to get through all steps in our collective action frame. As a group we knew that due to the time restriction of the semester we wouldn’t be able to get boxed water on the campus by the end of the year, however it made us understand that the motivation we left for other people to continue with the campaign after the semester was over was very important. Using the resources of MSSA and the environmental committees on campus to continue this campaign after this semester makes us confident that the long-term goal of bringing boxed water to campus will one day be a reality.

Our group was very effective in making decisions as a whole that took into account everyone's opinions and thoughts. Our decision-making process usually started off with all members of the group brainstorming. This is called communicative rationality. Communicative rationality is decision making based on making rational decisions, arrived at with the input of others. It is based on talking about what should be done, drawing on lay knowledge, utilizing debate/ argument to resolve problem We then decided on which ideas made the most sense in terms of our goal. Every group member was allowed to discuss their opinion whether it was positive or negative. Our group agreed on majority of the decisions this project entailed, so the decision-making process was not difficult for us. We knew we all had similar interests before the project even began because we all identified similar interests and passions on our activist profiles at the beginning of the semester. However, there were a few decision where minor disagreements became an obstacle, but we were always able to resolve them by weighing out the pros and cons of both options.

The toughest decision for our group to make was the initial decision of what social issue to base our campaign around. We started out with several diverse ideas such as women's rights, equal opportunity for international students, and environmental issues. We made this decision by brainstorming what we could do for each issue, and we ended with a conclusion of focusing our campaign on environmental issues because not only is it something we can work directly with Minnesota State University, Mankato, but it also affects every single person which makes the issue incredibly relevant. We decided focusing on an environmental issue would be challenging but feasible. It would also be relevant and beneficial for everyone because it wouldn't be targeting one specific group; instead, it would be targeting the entire campus. In the end, our group was able to make effective decisions based on everyone's opinions. Our decision-making process was very effective because it allowed everyone to express their opinion in a mature way while still being realistic and respectful. After opposing opinions were expressed and pros and cons were weighed, we always ended up coming to a unanimous decision.

We did face various hurdles along the way such as trying to connect with dining services on campus, trying to work with all group members' diverse schedules, and deciding how to contact Sodexo. We consistently attempted to connect with dining services, but something always seemed to come up such as no response, not enough petition signatures, conflicting schedules, etc. We were finally able to reach them by being persistent and getting the president of MSSA/student body government, MeMe Cronin, involved. By getting her involved, it allowed us to gain attention and traction; we used our spheres of influence in addition to her spheres of influence to progress towards our goal. Spheres of influence are places where a person has connection to or directly has influence and power to how decisions are made. To overcome the hurdle of coordinating our schedules, we assigned different tasks to different group members based on whose schedule worked with what task. Luckily, the work ended up being divided up fairly evenly. If someone's schedule didn't work with a task, a different task was given to them to make up for it. Lastly, we overcame the obstacle of trying to connect with Sodexo by making them our last action. We decided after careful consideration that it would be best to have them as one of our last actions for the semester because they are an international company, so we knew it would take them a significant amount of time to respond to our letter.

One of the goals of our collective action frame was to gather signatures in support of our boxed water campaign. This goal was met because we were able to gather around 225 signatures from students, faculty, staff, and community members. Another goal of our collective action frame was to meet with University Dining Services. We met this goal by meeting with Kari Doffinger and Mark Constantine from University Dining Services on Tuesday April 24th, 2018.

All members of our group had very little experience with activism, so this campaign acted as our initial experience with activism. All of us learned a great deal about ourselves as well as each other. We also learned about how we can effectively be activists and impact social change in the future. One of the most important lessons we gained from this experience is that background research DOES matter. We all began to care so much more after we completed our background research. Not only did it impact our passion for the issue, but it also made us knowledgeable activists. Knowledge can be very influential in getting other people to acknowledge our campaign and even support it. Education is key to becoming successful activists. Another lesson we learned is that small steps make big change. We initially started this project with an overwhelming mindset. However, after completing each of our small actions, we now know that we are making a difference, and it is very likely that this will actually become a successful campaign by meeting the goal of convincing Sodexo/dining services to incorporate boxed water. All of us are pleasantly satisfied with how our campaign turned out, and we are excited to see what all of our small actions have accomplished!