

Sustainable Purchasing Guidelines

What is “Sustainable Purchasing” and Why does it matter?

“The aim and challenge of sustainable procurement is to integrate environmental and social considerations into the procurement process, with the goal of reducing adverse impacts upon health, social conditions and the environment.” (*United Nations Procurement Practitioner’s Handbook*)

Put differently, our purchasing practices are an extension of our institutional values, and every University dollar spent is a decision to support specific practices and priorities. We can act on our climate action goals by selecting environmentally beneficial products. We can affirm our commitment to justice and equality by choosing vendors that pay a fair wage and treat their employees equitably. We can support our neighbors by sourcing locally. In being thoughtful about what we buy and how we buy it, we can use our institutional purchasing power as a tool not just for reducing harm but for creating positive change.

General Guidelines

Spending decisions can be complicated, more so when layered with specific department needs, and the idea of vetting every purchase for environmental and social concerns can seem daunting, but the basic principles are simple.

- Reduce waste by buying only what we need.
- Support environmental health by buying items produced with, operated with, and disposed of with environmentally beneficial practices.
- Support human health by avoiding products with toxic ingredients and outputs.
- Support social health by choosing manufacturers and vendors that treat workers and communities with equity and respect.

Unsure how to put these principles into action? Start by asking the questions below before taking out that credit card or filling out that Purchase Order. Using these basic considerations will put you on the right path to making real, positive change:

- **Is it necessary?** Habit and impulse can be powerful drivers and may lead to unnecessary purchases. Confirm the purchase meets an actual need, and, if yes, what quantity is really necessary. Evaluate automatic re-orders periodically to make sure they still reflect current needs.
- **Does it provide the best long-term value?** A high quality, long-lasting product is a better choice economically and environmentally than a less expensive product of inferior quality that will have to be replaced frequently.
- **Is it made out of reused or recycled products?** From office supplies to building supplies, products made with recycled content cause significantly less environmental stress than those made with brand new materials. Details about what portion of the product/packaging are made from recycled content should be available on the product label. [Click for more detail on label language.](#)
- **Is the packaging minimal?** In the U.S., 90% of product packaging goes to the landfill. Choose options with the most minimal packaging possible. For larger and/or repeat orders, work with vendors to set low/no packaging delivery standards.

- **Is it energy and water efficient?** Products designed for low energy/water use are good environmental and economic choices, providing years of operational savings in water, energy and dollars. Choose products with [WaterSense](#) and [Energy Star](#) certifications, and for electronics look for products with an [EPEAT](#) rating of silver or higher. Avoid products that require continuous power.
- **Can it be disposed of responsibly?** Think about the product's end of life. The best product choices will be long-lasting and [eligible for campus recycling or composting](#) post-use. When short-term use is required (e.g. disposable serving ware), select products that can be composted. If that is not possible, look for items that can be reused or recycled. *Do not purchase disposable plastics or Styrofoam products.*
- **Can it be ordered through, or in collaboration with, another department on campus?** Collaborating with other campus departments in purchasing allows access to the better pricing, additional customer-choice, and delivery efficiencies that come with bulk orders. For example, food service supplies (napkins, serving ware) can be ordered through Dining Services and office supplies can be ordered through the University Store. Intra-departmental office supply orders can be organized across groups with like-needs. Each department should have a designated purchasing contact to maximize internal efficiencies and opportunities for cross-campus collaboration.
- **Is it available locally?** Purchasing from local sources reduces greenhouse gas emissions from transportation, increases access to information about vendor practices, and supports the local economy.
- **Is it a low/no toxins choice?** Harmful chemicals can be found in anything from cleaning products to paint to three-ring binders, but equally effective low/no toxin options are available. Avoid products with VOCs, formaldehyde, chlorine and PVCs, lead and mercury. For cleaning, sanitary, and building equipment and maintenance products, look for options that are [Green Seal](#) or [Ecologo](#) certified.
- **Is the product made in a socially responsible way?** Look for goods and services from companies that prioritize social responsibility, including a workplace free from harassment and discrimination, fair wages and conditions for workers, and environmentally friendly operations. [Fair Trade Certification](#) indicates a product has been vetted for “safe working conditions, environmental protections, sustainable livelihoods and community development funds” and can be a good starting point, as is checking for participation in the [Fair Labor Association](#). Reviewing published company policies and relevant media from reliable news sources can also provide useful context. The US Department of Labor maintains a list of [products considered likely to be made by child or forced labor](#).

Department-specific guidelines and recommended product and vendor lists are in development and will be posted at <https://my.wlu.edu/sustainability> as they become available. For additional support in adopting sustainable purchasing practices, please contact the Offices of Sustainability and Energy Education at OSEE@wlu.edu