

My involvement in the campus clothing exchange at Thompson Rivers University became one of the most impactful environmental learning experiences in my academic journey. Over the three years I helped develop and operate the initiative, my understanding of sustainability shifted from a general awareness of environmental issues to a more systems-based perspective that recognizes consumption patterns, waste streams, and accessibility as interconnected challenges.

Before this experience, my perception of environmental sustainability was relatively surface-level. I understood that reducing waste and recycling were important, but I viewed these actions as individual responsibilities rather than components of a larger system. I did not fully consider how industries like fast fashion contribute to environmental degradation, nor did I recognize the scale of textile waste or the social barriers that influence consumption. My behavior reflected this limited understanding—I made occasional “sustainable” choices, but they were inconsistent and not grounded in a deeper awareness of impact.

Through my work with the clothing exchange, I developed a much more nuanced understanding of sustainability, particularly in relation to circular economies and waste reduction. One of the most significant things I learned was how clothing waste operates as both an environmental and social issue. By collecting, sorting, and redistributing clothing, I saw firsthand the volume of usable items that would otherwise be discarded. This experience challenged my previous assumptions about waste and made it clear that disposal is often a failure of systems rather than individual negligence.

Additionally, I gained practical skills in organizing sustainable initiatives, including logistics, community engagement, and resource management. For example, coordinating clothing drives required planning around seasonal demand, storage limitations, and equitable distribution. These experiences taught me that sustainability is not just about ideals, it requires strategic thinking, adaptability, and collaboration. I also learned how to communicate sustainability in a way that resonates with others. Rather than framing the exchange purely as an environmental effort, we emphasized affordability and accessibility, which increased participation and broadened its impact.

This learning is important because it highlights the role of community-based solutions in addressing environmental challenges. Large-scale environmental issues can often feel overwhelming, but the clothing exchange demonstrated that localized initiatives can create meaningful change. By extending the lifecycle of clothing, we reduced waste while also supporting students who may not have the financial means to purchase new items. This reinforced the idea that sustainability must be inclusive to be effective.

The experience also shifted my values and attitudes toward consumption. I became more critical of fast fashion and more intentional in my own purchasing decisions. Instead of viewing clothing as disposable, I now see it as a resource with embedded environmental costs, including water use, energy consumption, and labor. This shift has influenced not only my personal habits but also how I engage in conversations about sustainability. I am more confident in advocating for reuse and more aware of the importance of meeting people where they are in their understanding of environmental issues.

Looking forward, this learning will continue to shape my actions and goals. I plan to apply the skills I developed, particularly in organization and communication, to future sustainability initiatives, whether in academic, professional, or community settings. I am especially interested in expanding access to sustainable resources, as the clothing exchange demonstrated how equity and environmentalism are closely linked. In future projects, I will prioritize solutions that address both environmental impact and social needs.

Furthermore, I will continue to refine my approach to sustainability by focusing on systems-level thinking. Rather than only considering individual actions, I will look at how policies, institutions, and cultural norms influence environmental outcomes. This perspective will allow me to contribute more effectively to long-term, structural change.

In conclusion, my experience with the TRU campus clothing exchange transformed my understanding of environmental sustainability from a set of individual actions to a complex, interconnected system. I learned the importance of waste reduction, circular resource use, and inclusive community engagement, and I developed practical skills that will support my future involvement in sustainability initiatives. Most importantly, this experience reshaped how I think about consumption and responsibility, providing a foundation for continued growth and meaningful contribution to environmental sustainability.