

The Grinnell College Apparel Purchasing Committee Annual Report for the 2003-2004 academic year

Background:

Over the past 3 years the college has had considerable discussion about the so called “sweatshop” issue. The basic concern is that in some countries, individuals engaged in the manufacture of apparel force their workers to work in unacceptable conditions and without certain basic human rights. After considerable discussion at the presidential and board of trustee level, the college decided that it should not purchase apparel from manufacturers that do not have certain rights for their workers. To that end, the college has developed and approved the Grinnell College Apparel Purchasing Policy.

Additionally, there has been considerable debate as to which “watch dog” group the college should be affiliated with. Although there are several organizations that are involved in the sweatshop issue, the college has focused on the Workers Rights Consortium (WRC) and the Fair Labor Association (FLA). Ultimately, the college decided to join both organizations.

Scope of the committee

In order to implement above mentioned policy, President Osgood appointed the Committee to Implement the Grinnell College Apparel Purchasing Policy.

The committee’s charge is to implement the policy as stated. Issues of which “watch dog” groups to affiliate with and questions about the scope of the policy are beyond the committee’s purview.

Committee Members

Committee members during 2003-2004 included:

Leah Bry, Shannon Heffernan, Elisa McCool (students)
Kara Lycke, Evelyn Freeman (Faculty)
John Kalkbrenner (VP for College Services, and committee chair)
Cassie Wherry (Bookstore Manger)

Committee activities this year

The 2003-2004 academic year was the first year in which the committee existed. Good progress has been made in that first year. The order of business has been to review the college’s apparel purchasing procedures and to make sure that the college is not currently purchasing any items manufactured under sweatshop conditions.

There are two units on campus that do most of the apparel purchasing. Those units are the Bookstore and the Athletics Department.

In the case of the Bookstore, Cassie Wherry has required vendors to provide a written document outlining their commitment to not dealing in merchandise produced under so called “sweat shop” conditions. These documents are often referred to as a “code of conduct”. Cassie has a book of dozens of such “code of Conduct” letters from all of the vendors from which the Bookstore buys.

Regarding the Athletics Department, the situation is more complex. Coaches order apparel for their teams from intermediaries, not from original manufacturers. So, it can be difficult to know exactly what company manufactured the item. The committee decided that the best approach would be to contact all retailers from whom the Athletics department buys and request a Code of Conduct letter. This will make retailers more aware of the growing concern about the sweatshop issue and will, in turn, make them pressure their suppliers toward compliance.

The committee has worked with the Athletics department to put in place procedures for contacting all retailers from whom they purchase apparel. Also, the committee crafted a letter and supporting materials to be sent to these vendors.

The Committee looked into the issue of licensing the Grinnell College logo and name for printing on various apparel items. At this time, the college has no licensing agreements and therefore this is not a concern for the committee.

This spring, the committee turned its attention to other college departments that also purchase apparel. But learning what departments actually purchase apparel is no easy task. In order to do that, the college needs to track such purchases. The committee has started a dialog with the accounting office to explore better ways to track apparel purchases in other areas of the college. This will help the college, and the committee, understand which departments purchase apparel.