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## Thrifting Your Way to the Bank: How Student Consumption of Recycled Clothing Impacts Financial Stability

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Thriftig Your Way to the Bank:  
How Student Consumption of Recycled Clothing Impacts Financial  
Stability

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Northern Illinois University

## **Introduction**

Clothing oneself is an essential aspect of living in the United States. Clothing provides a multitude of necessary functions, such as shelter from harsh weather and protection from wildlife. Having a variety of clean clothing allows one to meet hygiene standards that maintain the safety of society.

In addition to offering functionality, the clothing one wears serves as a symbol of one's stature in society. New clothing has become increasingly expensive in recent years due to intense demand. Keeping up with the ever-changing fashion world has furthermore caused a societal need to buy clothing more frequently. In addition to micro-trends driving up purchases, clothing is also being manufactured with lower quality materials than in previous years. Average wear and tear has increased significantly causing everyday clothing to be bought every few months rather than yearly as was a previous societal norm.

As clothing holds meaning on both a physical and social level, it is important that it is accessible to all persons. College students are no exception to this. College students face high levels of income insufficiency due to unemployment and paying tuition. It is nearly impossible for them to afford to keep up with fashion trends and necessary clothing purchases. Second-hand stores have become a safe haven for college students to obtain affordable and appealing clothing.

An even more affordable option than thrift stores are clothing pantries. Clothing pantries offer free attire to beneficiaries. Some clothing pantries have eligibility requirements, such as income level benchmarks or being above a certain number of dependents, whereas some may allow any community member to utilize the pantry.

The college campus of Northern Illinois University is home to a free second-hand clothing source, the Huskie Closet. The closet is open two days a week, and during operation, students can come in and utilize the service to obtain a variety of zero cost, second-hand clothing items. The mission of the Huskie Closet is to provide free clothing to all. Therefore, there are no eligibility requirements in order to utilize the services of the closet. The Huskie Closet offers clothing of all kind, including professional interview attire, winter apparel, and NIU branded casual clothing. Clothing is obtained for the closet via donation, which supports the nature of offering zero cost items.

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact that is made upon university student's finances when purchasing recycled clothing, as compared to purchasing new clothing. The study seeks to answer the question, To what extent does a college student's use of recycled clothing shops affect their financial stability? The goal of this study is to analyze financial data and personal accounts of college students and determine their feelings of financial stability in relation to their consumption of clothing.

This study consists of a literature review, explanation of methodology, results, and implications and recommendations. These elements allows us to understand how spending habits impact the daily lives of college students. As student debt is so prevalent, it is important to find ways to combat the issue. Clothing consumption is one aspect of spending, however understanding spending habits in relation to this topic can make a difference in the life of a college student who is struggling to pay bills or feed themselves.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Income of College Students**

Finances of college students are vastly unique and exist within a large range. They are variable depending on one's dependance status, family situation, employment status, financial aid, and a variety of other factors. According to Dwyer et. Al, two thirds of college students have acquired debt by the time of graduation (2012). A large reason for this abundance of debt is the lack of clarity surrounding financial aid. College students face a great deal of uncertainty regarding the extent to which they may receive financial aid. Families often times opt out of applying for any financial aid whatsoever because they are confused by the process and do not feel the struggle is worth it for the amount of aid they will likely receive (Kane 1999). The mix of government grants, loans, and scholarships is complex and burdensome to take on without the assistance of an advisor.

It is apparent that the cost of college is not heading towards a decrease in the near future. Universities, both public and private, have been steadily raising spending each year. Even as universities reduce additional fees, students still find that a majority of their money goes towards tuition expenses (Desrochers & Hurlburt 2016).

The average pay of a college student in Illinois is roughly \$28,000 per year. With in-state tuition in Illinois averaging nearly \$20,000, students would have around \$8,000 to spend on food, hygiene, wellness, entertainment, and clothing. It is important to note that only 40% of full time undergraduate students are employed. The average yearly income for unemployed students

was roughly \$4,000 Based upon these calculations, unemployed freshman students should be prepared to take on the next four years with a budget of roughly 16,000.

### **College Student's Purchase of Clothing**

Purchasing clothes is essential when living on a college campus due to the active nature of a college campus. Students are constantly walking around to classes, dining halls, the library, and social events. Keeping up with necessary purchases caused by wear and tear puts a strain on them financially. The average household spends \$120 on clothing per month. As the average household contains roughly 3 persons, it can be assumed that one individual spends roughly \$40 per month on clothing. Given the income levels of students, this is likely to make a large impact on their finances.

A study from the University of Northern Texas found that students were spending far more than \$40 a month on clothing. The study followed the purchasing patterns of 755 students over a semester, and found that the students purchased 10,931 items, an average of 14.5 items a person, totaling \$754,239. This indicates that the median amount students spent on clothing over 16 weeks was \$69 (2023). Calculations show that students in this study spent roughly \$1,000 on clothing per semester. For students earning \$3,900 per year, spending \$2,000 on clothing causes a loss of over half of all their income.

While the above study does not fall closely in line with the assertion that individuals spend roughly \$40 a month on clothing, a reason for this could be that college students who grew up in the age of credit cards find money to be more disposable. According to Jones & Roberts, credit card spending is found by college students to be abstract and unreal due to the lack of a

cash transaction (2005). 45% of college student who have credit cards report having more than one. Because of the frivolous nature of spending, 36% of college students report having over \$1,000 of credit card debt before graduation.

### **Saving Money Through the Purchase of Recycled Clothing**

To begin saving money through the purchase of second-hand clothing, one must be motivated to save money. The prevalence of credit card debt amongst college students since the early 2000s is a large motivating factor to save money. It is evident that economic adaptation is a large reason to begin thrifting (James et. Al 2010). Saving money is essential to students with credit card debt, as is clothing themselves. Wear and tear on clothes and shoes is incredibly common, so the need to buy clothing is extremely prevalent, causing students to be faced with the dilemma of having little money and needing expensive items.

The practice of thrifting has become increasingly trendy and accessible since the 2010s. Interest in buying secondhand can be attributed to a variety of causes such as economic disadvantage and concern for climate change (Nair 2019). With advancements of technology, apps such as Thredup and Depop have claimed stakes in the online resale market. Brick and mortar thrift stores have seen price increases in the recent years, whereas online resale stores have been able to markdown clothing costs, likely due to the increasing amount of sellers and buyers. Thredup is the leading secondhand retailer as of 2022. While increasing prices in brick and mortar stores may serve as a disadvantage to older generations, Generation Z college-aged students will likely benefit off of the popularization of second-hand apps. As it is more common

for college students to have cell phones than a car, it is more accessible to purchase clothes from a phone than an off-campus store.

Saving money is not only possible through second-hand apps, but also through local thrift stores. A survey of 1,002 United States citizens found that an average of average of \$1,760 was saved by thrifting each year (Dickler 2022). Given the knowledge that college students were found to spend roughly \$2,000 in an academic year, the practice of thrifting is likely to save them an abundance of money.

Through saving money students find themselves more prepared to take on life post-graduation. With the money that is saved from second-hand shopping, students can set themselves up for success in their careers. Graduates are able to use their saved money to buy attire for interviews, purchase a car to drive to and from their place of employment, or pay rent on an apartment near their job.

Graduating with debt severely disadvantages students and can cause them to land in the system of poverty. Students have reported graduating with over \$100,000 of loan debt (Avery and Turner 2011). This debt in combination with the credit card debt that students report obtaining puts them in an extremely deep economic hole. Attempting to afford a home while also paying back their various debts is a near impossible task. In addition to lacking the ability to support themselves financially, college grads who are in debt find themselves having mental health crises due to the uncertainties they face (Godinic et. Al 2020). Students are sucked into a decade long battle with finances from the time of their graduation; if they do not make smart monetary decisions, they may never get out of debt. This asserts that saving money is of the utmost importance in order to achieve long-term financial stability.



## **Methodology**

Research was conducted for this study using both quantitative and qualitative methods. I first used the qualitative method of analyzing reports from the Huskie Closet. This allowed me to assess the impact that the closet has made to students throughout the semester. I then used the quantitative methods of surveying and conducting a focus group. Using a combination of these methods allowed me to analyze data from both a primary and a secondary source. Thus, I was able to draw conclusions based on first hand accounts as well as pre-recorded data.

### **Survey Sample Selection**

The case study for this research was a population consisting of college students attending Northern Illinois University. I decided to put very few restrictions on eligibility requirements for the survey. I negated the process of asking respondents to provide their ZIDs. I did not ask individuals to enter their ZID in order to maintain anonymity. Prioritizing anonymity allowed the identity of respondents to be protected, which has been linked to higher response rates (Murdoch et al. 2014). Anonymous surveying tends to yield higher disclosure rates which are associated with higher levels of accuracy.

### **Survey Procedure**

The survey asked the following six questions: What is your Gender Identity? Which of the following best describes your current employment/student status? Which of the following best describes your personal income level? How many times have you utilized the Huskie Closet this semester? How many times have you shopped at a thrift store this semester? How would you

rate your financial security? The intent of the questions was to focus on respondents employment status, income level, spending habits, and clothes shopping habits.

To distribute the survey, I created a quick response (QR) code that is easily able to be scanned by the camera of a smart device. I furthermore created a shorted URL with the website [tinyurl.com](https://tinyurl.com). The survey was then accessible through the URL [tinyurl.com/recycledfinance](https://tinyurl.com/recycledfinance). My specific aim was to make the survey as easily accessible as possible in order to garner the greatest amount of responses. After creating shortcuts for easy access, I contacted the faculty from the Center for Nonprofit and NGO Studies and asked for the survey to be distributed. The QR code was then distributed to teaching faculty within the Nonprofit and NGO Studies department. The faculty displayed the QR code in the announcements portion of each class. The QR code was furthermore posted to the social media of The Center for Nonprofit and NGO Studies, including Facebook and Instagram. Upon the distribution of the QR code via nonprofit studies classes, I received many of my responses. The last method of survey distribution I utilized was direct contact with individuals at the Holmes Student Center. I walked around the student center and asked individuals if they were willing to take the survey. The direct response course allowed me to garner participation for my next method of research collection.

### **Focus Group Sample Selection**

When utilizing the direct response method for my survey, I asked individuals if they would be willing to participate in a focus group regarding the topic of the survey. Through this, I found five individuals who were willing to meet for an online focus group. Of these individuals, three were female-identifying, one was male-identifying, and one identified as gender queer. The individuals were within the age ranges of 18-25. Conducting this focus group allowed me to ask

questions to individuals that were limited when I used the survey format. The individuals who participate in the focus group had their identities protected through the use of a pseudonym.

### **Focus Group Procedure**

In the focus group, the following questions acted as a basis for our conversation: How would you describe your spending habits regarding clothing? How do you feel about purchasing second-hand clothing? What is your reasoning for utilizing or not utilizing the services of the Huskie Closet? How did you first learn about the Huskie Closet? What would entice you to utilize the Huskie Closet more often? Do you feel that the Huskie Closet has or could help you feel more financially stable?

Follow-up questions were asked throughout the focus group when applicable. The primary purpose of conducting the focus group was to allow the individuals within the group to have an open dialogue, rather than a conversation controlled by the researcher.

### **Huskie Closet Data Sample Selection**

The reports from the Huskie Closet that I used to assess the organization's impact levels are from the spring semester of 2023. Data up until March 23rd, 2023 was made available to me, therefore this method of research focuses on the first half of the spring semester. I used this data to determine how many visits have been made to the Huskie Closet, and the quantity of specific items that were distributed.

### **Huskie Closet Procedure**

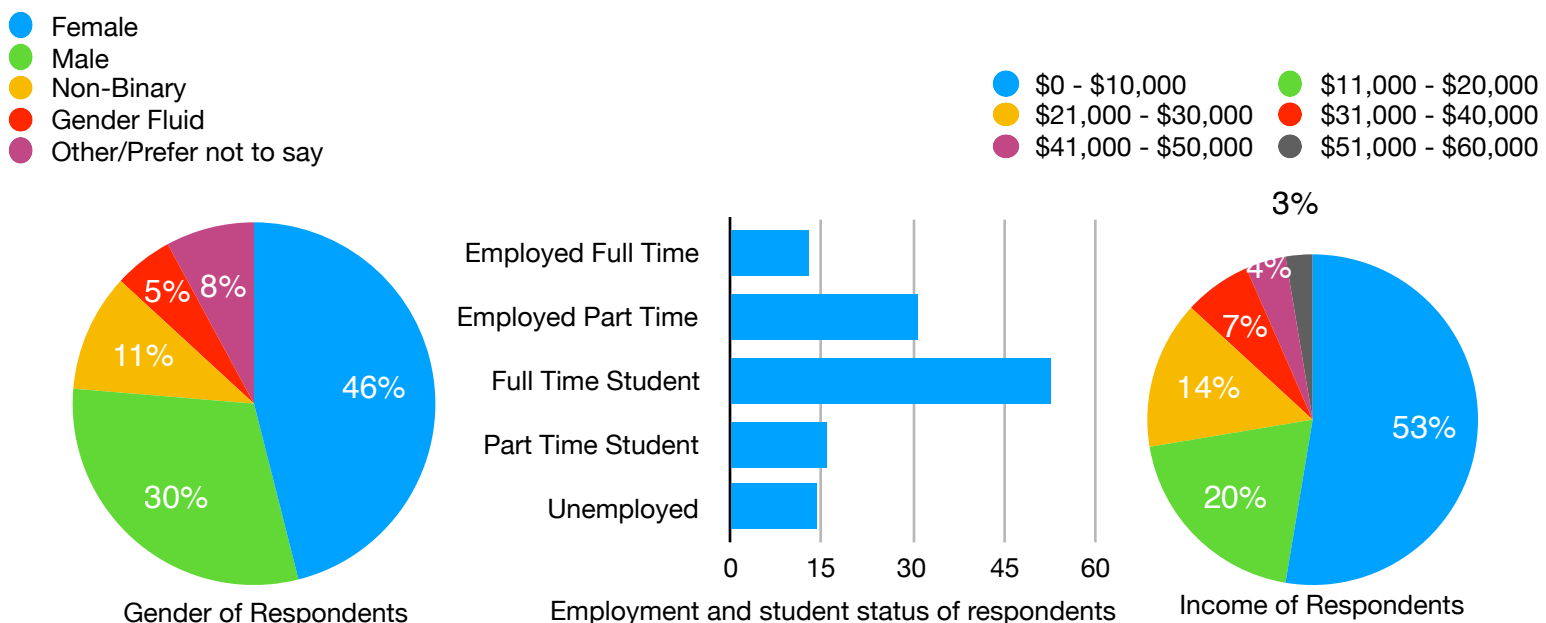
I obtained the data from the Huskie Closet via email exchange. The data was a raw scan of the check-out sheet that is used to report items obtained by customers of the Huskie Closet. I categorized the items on these sheets and counted how many of each item were taken throughout

the first half of the spring semester in order to determine what type of items were obtained from the closet and how many times it was visited.

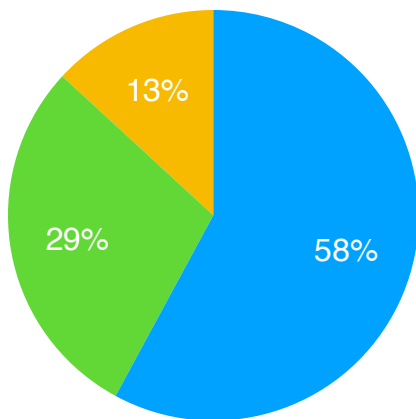
## Results

### Survey Results

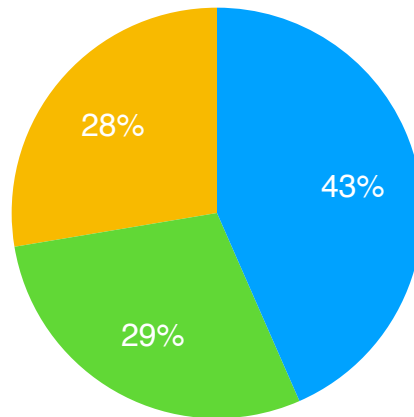
The survey garnered 76 responses. A majority of these responses were female-identifying persons with an income of \$10,000 or less, who are full time students. More than half of the respondents furthermore signified that they hold part time jobs. The second largest income level noted was \$11,000-20,000, placing nearly three fourths of respondents in the two lowest income categories. Some respondents also identified as full time workers, and part time students. Most respondents had not utilized the Huskie Closet in the spring semester of 2023, however most had shopped at a thrift store three or more times. A majority of respondents rated their feelings of financial security as a three out of five, placing them exactly in the middle of the scale.



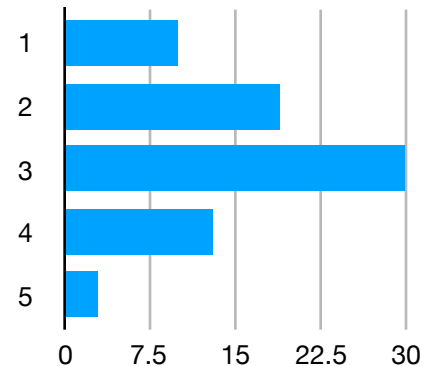
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Utilization of Huskie Closet by Respondents



Utilization of Thrift Stores by Respondents



Feelings of Financial Stability in Respondents

### Focus Group Results

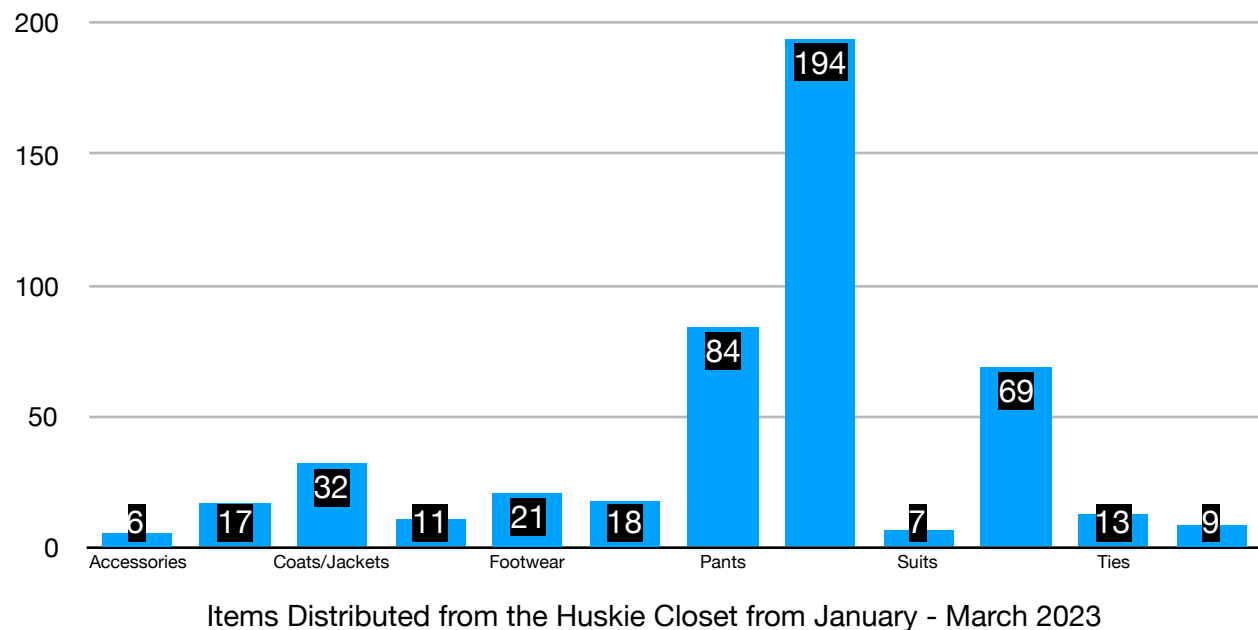
My major finding from the focus group is that individuals were not aware of the extent to which buying clothing affects their financial stability. When individuals described their spending habits regarding clothing, Participant A stated, “I think maybe I spend \$15 on clothes each month at the most.” Fellow participants stated the number that they thought they were spending on clothing each month. As the conversation continued a follow up question was prompted by the researcher: “When was the last time you went shopping for clothes?” As participant A thought about his answer, he came to the realization that he had spent \$25 on clothing within the month, and over \$100 on clothing before the spring semester started. Upon further thought, the other participants agreed that the original estimate they stated was lower than the realistic amount of money they spend on clothing per month.

Another major finding of the focus group was that individuals have little to no awareness of the services offered by the Huskie Closet. When asked about how long ago they learned about the Huskie Closet, two of the participants said that they had not known of the Huskie Closet until

they took the survey I distributed. One participant stated that they had learned of the Huskie Closet this semester, and the two others learned about it last year. Two participants said that they were not fully aware of the services offered by the Huskie Closet, and four said that they did not know the hours. When asked what could entice them to visit the Huskie Closet more, participant B stated, “More awareness would be helpful. Like maybe if they had social media accounts or made announcements in class I would go, because I don’t even know really anything about the hours or how to find information about it.” Each participant agreed that if they were aware of the details of the closet, such as the hours of operation and the location, they would visit at least once per semester.

### **Huskie Closet Data Results**

The Huskie Closet serviced beneficiaries 170 times throughout between January 26th and March 23rd, 2023. They distributed 481 items of clothing with 20 different types of clothing articles. The Huskie Closet distributed shirts at a higher volume than any other article of clothing, at 194 pieces. The least distributed type of clothing was accessories (jewelry, bags, and belts) at 6 pieces. Shoppers of the closet favored upper body wear, as jackets and sweaters also ranked high in popularity, only being out-ranked by pants. While professional wear appears to rank as unpopular items, when suits, ties, blazers, and vests are totaled together, the sum equates to 7.69% of the total items distributed. Seasonal items such as coats, gloves, hats, and scarves accounted for 10.3% of the total items distributed.



### Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this research indicate that student consumption of recycled clothing increases their financial stability. There is a clear correlation between utilization of recycled clothing and greater financial stability. This indicates that the Huskie Closet is succeeding at providing students with free resources to increase their financial comfortability. However, there are changes they could make to increase their impact as noted below.

### Survey Implications

The survey data stated that a majority of respondents rated their financial stability level as a three, the average level, and a majority of respondents also visited the thrift store 3 or more times in the semester. This indicates that the more likely an individual is to shop at a thrift store, the more likely they are to feel average financial security. A majority of respondents were employed part time and still visited the thrift store 3+ times. Because the mode income level reported through the survey was \$0-10,000, this indicates that the compensation for working a

part time job does not offer enough security to dissuade individuals from shopping at the thrift store. Despite 13 respondents reporting to hold full time jobs, only three respondents claimed to feel fully financially secure. This serves as further reasoning as to why 72% of respondents have shopped at a thrift store this semester.

### **Implications of focus group**

While nearly 3/4 respondents shopped at a thrift store this year, only 42% have utilized the Huskie Closet. The findings of the focus group serve as evidence that the lack of Huskie Closet utilization is due to a lack of information surrounding the organization. Focus group participants showed clear interest in utilizing the services of the closet, but the lack of any online presence made it so difficult to find information that it dissuaded them from going at all.

The findings of the focus group imply that there is a lack of student awareness regarding their finances and spending habits. Participants in the focus group underestimating the amount they spend on clothing per month indicates that they do not keep track of their spending or take a budget into consideration.

### **Implications of the Huskie Closet Data**

The data from the Huskie Closet indicates that students are becoming more aware of the services provided by the closet. In the fall of 2022, the Huskie Closet had 130 visitors. By March 23rd of the spring semester, the closet had serviced 170 beneficiaries. The organization surpassed its total of the previous semester by Spring break. This indicates that the Huskie Closet is garnering more support and beneficiaries. This certifies that the closet had been used to increase financial stability 170 times in the first half of the spring semester.



**Limitations**

The research in this study faced limitations. The survey data could potentially be skewed by individuals who do not attend Northern Illinois University, as there was no identity verification. Furthermore, categorization of the articles of clothing obtained from the Huskie Closet was subjected to my opinion as the researcher. For example, all tops were labeled as shirts whether they were described as blouses, camisoles, etc.; it could be argued that the categorizations are incorrect.

**Recommendations**

Based upon the implications of the research, I have two recommendations. My first recommendation is that Northern Illinois University offers education regarding student spending. It is apparent that students are not entirely aware of their spending habits. I believe that implementing a “making smart financial decisions” section into the UNIV101 course would be an efficient way to educate a large number of students. Specifically, teaching students how to budget would benefit them immensely. Given that a majority of college students are unemployed, and that a majority of the money they do possess goes toward tuition expenses, budgeting will allow them to wisely utilize their remaining money. Budgeting would furthermore help eliminate the disposability that young adults tend to feel regarding credit card spending, as noted by Jones and Roberts. Budgeting is a practical skill that teaches restraint and it can be carried through one’s post-grad life as well. Introducing budgeting into student lives would allow them to be conscious of their monetary situation and increase overall financial security.

Furthermore, in order to better service the student body, the Huskie Closet should create social media pages and a website. The data indicates that awareness of the Huskie Closet is relatively low. Social media is one of the most efficient outlets to reach a young audience (Sponcil and Gitimu 2013). Currently, information regarding the Huskie Closet is not widely accessible. With a wider outreach, the Huskie Closet would be able to garner a larger audience and students would secure a greater level of financial security with the help of the closet's services. With more awareness, the Huskie Closet would also likely obtain more donations thus allowing them to offer a larger array of items and increasing their programming abilities.

I believe that implementing budgeting into student lives and increasing utilization of the Huskie Closet would allow them to better save money. Instituting these recommendations at Northern Illinois University would allow student levels of financial security to increase.

### **Future Research Questions**

This study prompts further research questions. Based on the recommendations, my future research questions would be as follows: How has further utilization of the Huskie Closet impacted student financial stability? What is the monetary and environmental impact of the Huskie Closet?

Exploring these questions would expand upon the importance of utilizing recycled clothing sources. Prompting questions about the environmental impact would also provide a greater draw to the Huskie Closet. Any utilization of this organization ultimately increases student financial stability.

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