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Recycled Plastic Water Bottles Become Commencement Caps & Gowns

Last Modified 12:39 PM on Tue Mar 27, 2012

jggagnon@mtu.edu

906-487-3509,

By [John Gagnon](#)

March 27, 2012—

Graduates' caps and gowns will be green at Michigan Technological University's spring commencement on Saturday, April 28, 2012 — not in color, but in spirit. They will be colored black as usual, but they'll be made of Repreve, which is 100 percent recyclable yarn made from plastic water bottles.

It takes 27 plastic water bottles to make the yarn for one gown. Traditional cloth caps, gowns and tassels cost \$32 plus tax; the Repreve products cost \$32, tax included.

The green initiative has been discussed for a few years at Michigan Tech. It will now be the standard for commencements.

"How cool," says Beckie Belanger, of the Campus Bookstore, who located the product. She bartered with companies to get a good price. "I didn't want the graduates to have to spend more," she explains.

"We're excited about this," says Beth Pollins, assistant to the vice president of student affairs at Tech and a key player in commencement planning. "We've wanted to do this for quite awhile, and it has finally come together. It's part of our strategic plan to enhance our commitment to sustainability, so this is a great demonstration of our efforts."

Belanger and Pollins say that the recycled material is soft, breathable and doesn't wrinkle. It has a flat rather than a shiny look.

Repreve is made by Unifi, Inc., and the caps and gowns are made by Herff Jones. It takes 27 plastic bottles to make the yarn for one gown. The product not only uses recyclable material but also offsets the need to use refined crude oil to produce traditional polyester and nylon. The same recycled material is slated to be used in the seat fabric of the Ford Focus.

Unifi, a global leader in sustainable textile products, donates one percent of the sales of Repreve to five environmental causes. The firm recycles about 900 million water bottles a year

Since 27 water bottles equal one commencement gown, with about 1,000 graduates at Michigan Tech this spring, 27,000 empty bottles will be put to use instead of into the landfill.

After commencement, graduates can donate their caps and gowns to be recycled once again.

Michigan Technological University (www.mtu.edu) is a leading public research university developing new technologies and preparing students to create the future for a prosperous and sustainable world. Michigan Tech offers more than 130 undergraduate and graduate degree programs in engineering; forest resources; computing; technology; business; economics; natural, physical and environmental sciences; arts; humanities; and social sciences.

Original URL: <http://www.mtu.edu/news/stories/2012/march/story65986.html>