The University of Washington is committed to social responsibility in its apparel purchasing practices. Towards this end, several years ago the UW joined the Workers Rights Consortium, committing itself to only purchasing apparel produced under conditions that respect basic labor rights.

Yet there is reason to believe that apparel for the UW is still being produced under conditions in violation of WRC standards. In 2006, for example, production for the UW was reported at over a dozen factories in Guatemala; while specific information on labor conditions in these facilities is not available, none have labor unions, and the industry as a whole is characterized by frequent abuses of workers’ rights as flagrant as the denial of bathroom breaks and forced pregnancy testing. Without denying this reality of widespread exploitation, some experts argue that sweatshops offer avenues to development, and that attempting to eradicate them might actually harm impoverished nations. Others suggest that it should be unconscionable to buy apparel produced under such conditions. What are our responsibilities to those who produce for our consumption? What practical considerations limit options for ethical consumerism in this global industry? What opportunities exist for change; how desirable and realistic are they?

This case study has global implications, for UW’s situation is far from unique. The challenges faced by this university are also faced by all its peers; and the pitfalls of labor protections in Guatemala are representative of the apparel industry worldwide. This task force’s challenge will be to develop policy recommendations for the UW administration to ensure that our community’s principles are upheld in practice.

Students in this intensive, quarterlong transnational task force will:

- study the history of the anti-sweatshop movement at US universities, and UW’s involvement in it
- examine current initiatives by the FLA, WRC, and other groups dedicated to improving labor rights in factories producing collegiate apparel
- study the ethical, political, and economic debates about sweatshop labor
- speak to corporate executives of a US brand with an existing UW contract and production in Guatemalan factories (pending confirmation)
- participate in a weeklong factfinding mission to Guatemala to meet with labor specialists, factory workers and management, in-country representatives of the US brands, and others (during week 7 of the quarter)
- visit a Guatemalan factory that produces UW apparel (pending confirmation)
- draw independent conclusions, and make recommendations to the UW Administration

Admission to this course is restricted to IS and LSJ majors. Students will be responsible for:

- Paying a $500 fee (in addition to regular tuition). Airfare, transportation, lodgings, and two meals a day are provided; students are responsible for paying for their own books, any travel-related medical expenses, and other incidental costs.
- A passport is required, and for non-US citizens, a visa may be required, to travel to Guatemala.
- Because of safety concerns associated with travel to Guatemala, students will be required to follow strict security protocol.