

N.C. colleges take to "green" graduation gowns

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Unifi Inc. and two vendors have added a recycling touch to the apparel that college students wear to celebrate graduation.

Unifi's Repeve product, made from recycled plastic bottles, is being used in caps and gowns by 19 colleges and universities in North Carolina, including Davidson County Community College, Elon University, Salem College and Academy, Wake Forest University and Winston-Salem State University.

Introduced in 2006, Repeve has been a major sales and branding factor in Unifi's stunning financial turnaround. The Greensboro company, with its largest manufacturing operation in Yadkinville, returned to profitability in 2010 after 10 years in textile limbo.

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Repeve gowns

In North Carolina, 11 colleges and universities supplied by Herff Jones use Repeve-branded Green Keeper commencement gowns.

They are: Belmont Abbey, Catawba, Central Piedmont Community, Davidson County Community, Haywood Community, Johnson & Wales, Montreat, Orange County Community, Pfeiffer, Salem College and Academy, and Winston-Salem State.

For their commencement gowns, Nine North Carolina colleges and universities use the Green Weaver product, made from Repeve material, from Oak Hall Cap and Gown.

They are: Central Carolina Community, Duke, Elon, Fayetteville Technical Community, N.C. School of Science and Mathematics, N.C. State, UNC Asheville, UNC Chapel Hill and Wake Forest.

Source: Unifi Inc.

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Four major apparel customers — Eddie Bauer, North Face, Patagonia and Polartec — sell outdoor and sportswear featuring Repeve. Walmart, Haggard, Sears and Cintas are working with Unifi on Repeve apparel programs.

The caps and gowns are available from vendors Herff Jones and Oak Hall Cap and Gown. The Herff Jones gowns carry a Repeve tag, while the Oak Hall gowns are privately labeled.

Herff Jones said that each gown made with Repeve uses about 29 post-consumer plastic bottles. Considering 140 universities and colleges are using Repeve gowns sold by Herff Jones — with a combined 240,000 graduates — that means nearly 7 million recycled plastic bottles were used in the process this spring alone.

"Recognizing that these gowns are a one-time-use product, it was very important to make them from Repeve, helping to reduce their overall environmental impact," said Tom Carew, general manager of the cap and gown division of Herff Jones.

"Following commencement, through the Renew Gown Recycling Program, graduates can donate their gowns to be recycled back into Repeve, helping to create a closed-loop recycling process."

College students and campuses are at the forefront of environmental conscience and green habits, said Joseph D'Angelo, an executive vice president of Oak Hall.

"When we started seeing such campus trends as biodegradable utensils, we felt developing an environmentally friendly gown was the right thing to do for students, colleges and universities and our planet," D'Angelo said.

Jeanne Kiley, store manager of the Winston-Salem State bookstore, said the caps and gowns "are part of accelerating the green process on campus. We have received very positive responses so far."

Wearing a recycled gown makes perfect sense to Ashley Suchoski, who is graduating with a mathematical business major at Wake Forest. The university began using the Repeve gowns in 2010.

"Sustainability has become very important to me as I've learned about its impact on the environment," Suchoski said. "It's encouraging that the university and students are running with an effort that is keeping so much new material from having to be used."

Finding a significant use for Repeve outside casual apparel could mean more than just additional sales for Unifi: more jobs as well.

In May 2011, Unifi opened an \$8 million Repreve recycling center on its Yadkinville complex, running two extrusion lines around the clock at the 50,000-square-foot facility.

The center led to the creation of 25 jobs, expanding Unifi's workforce in Yadkinville to about 970. Unifi also makes Repreve at its global plants.

"As Repreve continues to grow, we anticipate growth in our production facilities and adding additional jobs" in Yadkinville, said Roger Berrier, president and chief operating officer of Unifi.

Unifi donates a portion of Repreve sales to environmental causes, giving students a vote on five options.

Unifi also uses fabric scraps from textile manufacturers in the Repreve process.

It plans to recycle 100 percent polyester consumer apparel still containing salvageable fabrics by 2014.

Perhaps the biggest challenge in selling sustainable apparel is customers' willingness to pay extra. Herff Jones officials said the Repreve gowns cost between \$1 and \$2 more.

Berrier said as the Yadkinville center helps make more recycled yarn available, the cost of Repreve will decrease because of economies of scale.