The Office for Sustainability (OfS) plans on restructuring the Wesustain Internship Program incrementally over the next two years. Throughout the 2014 spring semester, I worked toward developing a plan to revamp our program and redefine the basic philosophies that we base our program on. After reviewing past iterations of the OfS Internship Program, it was clear that the internship revamp would have to be well researched, documented, and informed by student input. Our first step was to review materials including student surveys, focus group discussions, and data collected by previous OfS employees. By building upon existing resources, I was able to save time and tailor the internship to our students here at WMU.

The following steps were identified to guide the deliberate and continual effort for advancing the internship program. Goals are subject to modification on an as needed basis in response to research findings. Steps include: (1) To make a well informed plan to create a productive, gratifying, and educational internship program; (2) To research existing internships by conducting a best practice analysis of current sustainability internships at other institutions; (3) To develop an accessible and user-friendly electronic database that compiles resources from existing sustainability internship programs; (4) To create a recruitment and retention strategy based on other successful student positions at WMU.

In order to produce a unique teaching philosophy that complements positional tasks, I plan to construct an annotated bibliography that will include journal articles, books, and teaching materials pertaining to a hands on and sustainability-based education. The journal articles chosen for the bibliography are geared towards experiential learning and meaningful reflection of the internship experience. The Northwest Earth Institute (NWEI) is an organization from Portland, Oregon, that specializes in producing learning materials that sparks “shared learning, shared stories, and shared action in a variety of campus settings”. NWEI has a progressive approach to teaching sustainability within an existing curriculum to achieve broad learning objectives. The institute achieves a multifaceted experience through online discussion courses, webinars, eco-challenges, and written text. Excerpts will also be used from full-length books such as Earth in Mind by David Orr and Teaching as if Life Matters by Christopher Uhl. The ultimate aim is to provide a yearlong internship that will serve as a solid foundation for students when they enter their post-university life.

For the best practice analysis portion of the study, we developed research questions for existing internships at other universities. In order to have a uniform set of responses that could be used for program analysis, we produced 15 succinct questions
for facilitators of existing programs. The five main areas of inquiry pertain to their institutional background, tactics for program recruitment, internal structure hierarchy, challenges experienced thus far, and strategies to evaluate the effectiveness of their program. These questions guide interviews with campus leaders from across the country to better develop a plan based on best practices for the Office for Sustainability Wesustain internships. Thus far I have interviewed, or schedule interviews, with four of the eight schools identified as leaders in student-centered sustainability internships using the questions mentioned above. The schools I am currently collaborating with are the University of Michigan, Portland State University, Kalamazoo College, and Indiana University.

The third goal is to develop an accessible electronic database to compile resources from existing sustainability internship programs from across the country. While seeking information about internships from online sources, it was apparent that a centrally-located database of resources for sustainability internships in higher education did not exist at large. A further reason for creating such a database came from speaking with enthusiastic university directors who asked for any helpful content discovered to be forwarded on to their university. By using Google Drive as this central location, it will be easy to upload and share content with other schools looking to create a similar program. This database will be open for input and ready for additional resources by the completion of the project at the end of the summer one term. In partnership with general information found, I am creating an organized database of contacts to be updated on an ongoing basis. This excel file contains contacts, departments, e-mails, direct line phone numbers, and other basic information pertaining to individual university offices.

Our final goal is to work with existing student positions at WMU to recruit and retain a diverse cadre of student leaders for the Wesustain internships. The focus of this inquiry is focused toward looking at jobs and internships that already exist at WMU. These positions are considered to be held in high esteem and competitive to students across campus. This portion recognizes that every school works differently, and what works at one may not work here at WMU. The ideal interviews will come from programs that incorporate experiential learning into the internship experience and have effective recruitment, retention, and program development strategies built into their program. Thus far, I have identified Orientation Student Leaders, Student Ambassadors, Fall Welcome Ambassadors, and Lead Corps Crew Members as best practice leaders on campus.