A student-centered café is a catalyst to support a culture of diverse and engaged students at Western Michigan University. Located in the lower level of the student union, the Campus Trends Space provides an ideal gathering space for healthy food, art, music, education, and socializing.

Past and recent efforts to establish a student-centered café have been inspired to create a space that does not currently exist at this university. Research conducted by WMU students in the spring of 2014 reveal that students overwhelmingly desire “increased food options on campus (i.e. local, healthy, diet sensitive options), and broad support for creating a space where students can drink coffee, play music, display art, or express themselves in other ways” (Student Sustainability Survey 2014).
Challenges and Opportunities

Despite the widespread support and enthusiasm for a student-centered café, we are concerned that without administrative support, this concept will never be fully realized. With a formal commitment from the Bernhard Center and Student Affairs, our planning group would be able to secure important partnerships that will be important to ensure a vibrant and successful student-centered café. Over the past year this café initiative has been discussed several times by the Bernhard Center Advisory Council and small focus groups comprised of WMU staff, faculty and students. During these discussions, we have clarified that this café needs to be student-centered, meaning there must be opportunities for students to participate through internships and student jobs that provide hands-on opportunities to work on the planning, programming, and café operations. Administration from Student Affairs, the Bernhard Center, Dining Services, and other entities across campus will support our goals through funding, procurement, management, staffing, oversight, and the necessary continuity that will be required to institutionalize continuity for a successful and sustainable café at WMU. With administrative support, we can operate as a revenue neutral café that is responsive to and inspired by the needs and desires of the students at WMU.

Sowing and Growing Support

Recent efforts this past spring to rekindle the student-centered café have generated broad support from students, faculty, and staff across the university. This body of support is represented by: Student Activities and Leadership Programs, The WSA Student Government, The Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, The Dietetics Program, The Haenicke Institute, Human Performance and Health
Education, The Office for Sustainability, and a myriad of passionate and engaged students. One notable body of student work has been produced by students Alecia Wierenga and Alexandra Smith, who are studying interior design under professor Eleonora Philopoulus. The work of Alecia and Alexandra is noteworthy because they have acknowledged and built upon the work that has been done by the Campus Beet over the years and refined the concept as the Fresh Beet Café.

“The vision of the Fresh Beet Café is to provide locally grown, sustainable, and organic meals and snack options to the community. The phrase ‘Lettuce Turnip the Beet’ encompasses the concept of creating an inviting, bright and funky space that will inspire students to be healthy, active and social.” This concept wants to take what the Campus Beet has started and turn it up. The work of these students goes into great detail about the design of the entire space to ensure maximum accessibility by all students. Materials were selected for their sustainable features and textiles and lighting were chosen to reinforce the concept of a fun and engaging café that is both student-centered and sustainable. This concept and design was one of 5 student concepts that were designed and presented this fall semester 2014 (figure 1).
Other notable contributions across the campus include the work of Carol Weideman, who wants to use the café space for programming to teach students how to cook healthy and affordable meals to fully appreciate the value and significance of sustainable diets. Wolfgang Schloer of the Haenicke Institute is interested in collaborating to create a sustainable and student-centered café with globally focused food options and programming to support cultural and ethnic diversity. Other notable interests who have a vested interest in the student café concept are noted below in Figure 2.
Figure 2: Widespread collaboration is central to creating a student-centered café.

**Moving Forward & Critical Steps**

Despite the heart-felt work that has been done in support of a student-centered cafe, it is difficult to plan for an uncertain future. The most compelling organizations and departments on campus are also very busy and don’t have the time or means to support a concept without a budget or administrative support. With a formal commitment or MOU to support a student-centered café, a well organized planning committee will be able to establish and formalize strategic partnerships across the campus and the community who are interested in contributing to a healthy and
vibrant café. We understand that achieving administrative support for this student-centered café is just one of the many nuanced steps required to plan and develop the full scope of this concept. We are eager to work with the administration and all entities across campus to help ensure that this café becomes a model example for student and University collaboration. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Figure 3: Perspective illustrating areas for eating, study, meeting, entertainment, food sales, art installations, and more.

Design perspectives provided courtesy of:

Interior Design Program
Family Consumer Sciences
Course: FCS 3510 Junior Studio II
Selected Student Concept: Alecia Wierenga & Alexandra Smith
Instructor: Eleonora Philopoulos

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Office for Sustainability
November 11, 2014