Western Michigan University prides itself on being leaders in sustainability and on its progressive stances on climate change and the environment. The Office for Sustainability is helping to shape a campus culture of sustainability. One of the oldest standing student sustainability projects is the Sustainable Student Centered Café. This project has been trying to address the issue of the lack of sustainable, local, fresh, healthy food options for students that attend WMU. I began work on the café in Spring of 2014 in Dr. Glasser’s ENVS 4100 course and have been working tirelessly ever since! We have been taking steps towards the creation of the café this year and it is closer to competition that ever before in the past.

Since the beginning of this semester, we have met with administrators who have confirmed that the “Old Campus Trends” space in the basement of the Bernhard Center is now allocated to the Café Concept. We have decided that the most economically feasible option is to have a “phase-in” approach that slowly integrates food into the space, with a heavy emphasis on programming. To move closer towards the goal and mission of our concept of serving local, sustainable food, I have secured an approximately $10,000 Student Sustainability Grant to purchase commercial kitchen equipment to defray the costs for the University. With this allocated money, we will be able to purchase many commercial items such as a refrigerated deli case, Panini presses, blenders, soup warmers and biodegradable, compostable silver, dining wear and take-out boxes. Emphasizing sustainability by not allowing single use plastics and Styrofoam keeps the mission and vision of a truly sustainable café alive.

The most recent installment to the café moving forward is the formation of working groups that deal with both programming and food. Our working groups meet at the Office for Sustainability bi-weekly and are composed of sustainable leaders on campus that may have a specialty in programming or food. Thus far, we
have come up with a timeline and started having conversations about how logistically the café will happen. There are many things that need to happen before its "open date" in Fall of 2015. As organizers of the café, we must set goals and precedents in order to see a successful opening day.

The first goal is to partner closely with dining services in order to provide the best, optimal service and options for students. Working with dining services will eliminate many of the issues that come with transporting food long distances and uses campus resources to provide meals. Dining services is a stable, administratively run operation of the university and would provide a sustainable option. Working with dining services closely and forming a strong partnership is the best and most feasible option.

The second goal is to secure programming. The space needs to have programming that draws students in and causes them to return, with or without food. We need students to want to attend events in the space and realize that food will be coming, and to stay persistent with their attendance. Working with Chris Sligh, who represents the Student Activities and Leadership Programs (SALP) has been extremely beneficial because he has many insights on successful programming. We have also been closely working with the Haenicke Institute to provide a space where domestic and international students can mingle with different cultures and have programming that is specific to different international student groups.

Lastly, our last goal and one of our biggest challenges is hiring staff to work at the café when it opens in the fall. These staff members will have to be very knowledgeable on food systems, and running a restaurant. The working group sees hiring two graduate assistants and hiring work study students as employees. The issue with hiring graduate students is that they will be busy with their classes, and this job required full attention, especially in the first semester where it is up and running. To circumvent this issue, hiring two full time graduate assistants will help to accurately manage and run the café. These employees will report to dining services and a panel of students and faculty that help to make decisions for the café, keeping in mind students’ opinions is extremely important when facilitating the menu, programming and art options for the space.
In conclusion, the café is going to be a major success if we are able to successfully partner with dining services, secure diverse programming, and hire a staff of dedicated graduate and work study students. The café is finally a priority of the university and the Office for Sustainability, and will reflect all of the hard work and time that has gone into the concept over the past 10 years. With the implementation of the café, we will be increasing the sustainability of campus and boosting the local economy in Kalamazoo. The Fresh Beet Café will be not only a destination for students and faculty but also for community members looking for a healthy, sustainable, delicious food option on campus!