Introduction:

As the number of imminent threats to the state of the planet grows, our responsibility as global citizens to combat them grows correspondingly. These threats are sizeable and compounding. We are temporally and spatially removed from their consequences, making it all the more difficult to face them. Here at the Western Michigan University (WMU) Office for Sustainability (OFS) we seek to recognize these threats, identify the challenges surrounding them, and develop clear paths to actively protect our world from degradation. We believe this process starts with the dexterity and ambition of our students. The Wesustain Internship is a program designed to cultivate the knowledge, skills, and experience necessary for WMU students to become ambassadors for a more sustainable earth. A sustainability ambassador is an active member of their local and global communities who is mindful of and advocates for quality of life for all in their personal & professional endeavors as. As the Wesustain Internship Coordinator, it is my intention to give students the leadership and advocacy skills necessary to cultivate a culture of sustainability during their time on campus and into the future.

Methods and Results:

The Wesustain Internship is a semester-long, paid, discovery-driven opportunity for WMU students to learn about the history, current state, and trajectory of the sustainability movement. A cohort of 8-10 students from varying academic and personal backgrounds is recruited at the beginning of each semester.
We seek to bring together a diverse, multi-faceted cohort of interns in order to foster a culture of sustainability that is all-encompassing and border transcendent. Each week, this group of interns is expected to engage in 6-8 hours of internship related activities. These activities were designed toward achieving core competence in 5 main learning outcomes (figure 1). Continual, observational evaluation and highly curated pre and post assessments act as measures of the interns’ retention of these learning objectives. In short, these objectives are designed to cultivate the skills to describe the state of the planet and the effect of human influence upon it, understand the symbiotic relationship between species and cultures as well as what is necessary to maintain them, model sustainable living and strategic problem solving, organize short and long-term goals for large and small-scale sustainability initiatives, and efficiently articulate processes of combatting and navigating threats to a global structure that supports an affinity for all life. Each week is themed under a specific sustainability objective (i.e. alternative transportation, permaculture, alternative energy/design, recycling/waste management, sustainable food systems etc.). A set of readings are selected for each week based on this theme along with a journal question geared toward reflection and critical analysis. These topics are broken down and brought to a larger, applicable context through active dialogue in weekly discussion meetings. At the end of the week, an event is planned for the interns to implement these principles in a hands-on way. Interns engage in existing projects at the OFS and other organizations in the Kalamazoo community during these events. These activities are designed to cultivate the aptitude to model sustainable practices through leadership development and experiential learning.
This integrative approach is intentionally structured to promote a course of combatting the collapse of the planet as we know it in a forward-thinking, restorative manner. The Wesustain internship is a unique hub for social learning that brings young intellects together to live and advocate for a future of sustainability that is multi-dimensional and concrete.

Commentary, Reflection, and Next Steps:

As the coordinator of the Wesustain Internship, it is my duty to create an environment that is accessible to all students and conducive to innovation. This has meant committing myself to providing a platform for students to take off on. This includes prompting accelerative exchanges between students during the internship and assisting the propulsion into action after the internship. Extensive networking, exposure to new information, and introduction to opportunities in sustainability during the internship provide a learning workshop that ensures these efforts extend into the future.

This semester’s Wesustain interns came from all different personal experiences as well as academic backgrounds. Food Marketing, Mechanical Engineering, Environmental and Sustainability Studies, and Fashion Merchandising are just a few of the different academic majors that interns came from. Throughout the semester they were able to discover how sustainability is encompassed within and encompasses every facet of the human experience. They were thus able to connect sustainability to their areas of study, and discovered ways to intertwine sustainable themes into the structure of higher education. Students discovered alternative means of production, food consumption, transportation, energy usage, waste reduction, and even past-times; way of entertaining themselves all in ways that are less intrusive to the world around us. By relating their internship experiences to their pre-existing areas of interest, students were able to gain perspective on how to incorporate sustainability into their personal and professional lives.

A great deal of learning took place on my part as the coordinator of this program as well. I am the first person occupying this position as a part-time employee instead of a full-time employee. I am also the first undergrad student to hold this position. As there are certain restrictions on student jobs and access to facilities, it was challenging to meet the same time commitment that was previously allotted to this position. It was also challenging to balance the duties of a leadership position with the workload of my classes. However, I am an alumnus of the Wesustain Internship and therefore very familiar with its core principles and general structure. Being a previous member of the internship also gave me the problem solving skills necessary to navigate systems that are not set up in my favor. Active communication with my interns, support from my supervisors, and holding myself to a diligent yet flexible schedule were the main components that lead to a successful semester of facilitation.

In the future if a student is to fill this position after myself, some reorganizing and restructuring of the materials that guide this position needs to be done. Some
Innovations have been made, and unforeseen obstacles have occurred since the inception of the internship in 2014. These have not yet been reflected in the Coordinator Manual or training system. More specifically, accurate timelines for the scheduling activities according to weekly themes, readings, etc.; rubrics for assessment, journal entry, and overall engagement; and overall guidelines for the specific duties of the Internship Coordinator need to be arranged in a concise, understandable format. I plan on working on these efforts throughout the Summer 2016 semesters. This will hopefully make training and reference materials more conducive to a WMU student occupying the Wesustain Internship Coordinator position. It is my hope to do everything in my power to maintain the efficiency of this program that is so abundant in potential for improvement on the state of the future. Being an alumnus of the program myself, I am a testament to its success and am personally invested in keeping it on its progressive pursuit of quality of life for all.
References

Sustainability Internship Learning Outcomes

The goals of the WeSustain Internship Program are to cultivate informed and critically thinking advocates and ambassadors for sustainability through a cohort-based, leadership development and experiential learning framework. The following skills and knowledge-based learning outcomes are at the core of the program and progress toward them will be fostered through regular feedback and assessment.

(1) Students will be able to describe and discuss the state of the planet and be able to articulate the consequences of their everyday actions on multiple scales (on themselves, their communities, and on those distant from them in space and time, including nonhumans).

*Examples of these forms of knowledge: (a) learn the significance that nature plays in human survival and flourishing; (b) understand how seemingly small actions have profound consequences; (c) question dominant assumptions about the world and society that currently perpetuate unsustainability.*

(2) Students will develop a deep understanding of the coevolution and interconnectedness of all species and use this knowledge to explore human development opportunities and priorities that promote improvements in quality of life for all (especially the flourishing of nonhumans and endangered cultures).

(3) Students will explore leadership strategies, model sustainable behaviors, and experiment with changing their (and potentially others’) patterns of thinking and behaviors.

(4) Students will develop an understanding of the organizational goals and corresponding short- and long-term objectives that propel sustainability efforts at Western Michigan University on local, national, and global scales.

(5) Students will be able to effectively articulate, through written and oral communication, their knowledge of and appreciation for complex, interconnected, and sometimes conflicting sustainability challenges across multiple perspectives.