

## ***Student-led cafe teaches students about sustainability***

By Hannah Ball

*Three organizations work together to create a sustainable café on Western Michigan University's campus.*

Sometimes class projects can take a long time and a lot of collaboration-- like an 8-year-long, student-led sustainability project to create a cafe at Western Michigan University.

Professor Eleonora Philopoulos's Family and Consumer Sciences 3510 Studio II class is the latest group to work on the café project, joining WMU's Office for Sustainability and The Campus Beet, which started this initiative in 2007. The Campus Beet sustainability project focuses on creating a café on WMU's campus that will serve locally grown food in a setting that features student art and entertainment as well as educate students about sustainability. The Family and Consumer Science class developed potential designs for the sustainable café.

Jarl said the project was a learning tool to get students more engaged on campus and to involve different WMU organizations.

"It did help the students be more aware of the importance of designing sustainably," Jarl said. "They did quite a bit of research on materials and furniture."

The Family and Consumer Sciences 3510 Studio II class developed five different designs for the café titled: "The Fresh Beet Cafe," "The Living Cafe," "A New Leaf Cafe," "Laputa Cafe," and "Arts, Eats, Beats, Cafe." The designs are featured on WMU's Sustainability [website](#), which said the concepts incorporate "flexible and functional" use of space for a food serving area and use innovative solutions, all emphasizing on sustainability. Students paid attention to composting, recycling and local sourcing when planning their designs.

At the beginning of the design process, Nora Gimpel, a WMU senior majoring in environmental and sustainability studies and political science, presented the class with a general overview of the plan for the cafe, and the class did research on finding sustainable materials and furniture.

Alecia Wierenga, a student in the class, said she researched the Office for Sustainability, the Gibbs House, how other universities created sustainable cafes in order to find the best options and equipment. The class presented the designs to the Office for Sustainability.

"It was a great learning experience," Wierenga said. She worked with Alexandra Smith to design one of the five designs, "The Fresh Beat Cafe."

"A big challenge is trying to find sustainable materials," Wierenga said, adding that creating a cafe that fit into a sustainable budget was also a challenge because environmental-friendly materials aren't always cheap or cost effective.

"For sustainability, a good thing is to get your furniture within 500 miles," Wierenga said. "The closer the better."

The design class emphasized staying local. When the interior design students worked on the cafe, they put a distance cap on the project of 200 miles to minimize travel, Gimpel said. All the furniture and materials needed to construct the cafe needed to be found within 200 miles.

Wierenga said she was impressed with WMU's sustainability efforts.

"I've learned more so about Western and how they incorporate sustainability into student lives," Wierenga said. "What stood out to me most is realizing how many students at Western are passionate about being sustainability and how many people can work on these projects."

Gimpel said all the designs were amazing. She said the design students told her that "looking into [the cafe and sustainability] gave them an educational experience."

The cafe has been educational in development, and Gimpel said she hopes it will be educational when it comes to fruition.

Gimpel said a goal of the cafe is to provide a place where students can share music, art and talents, as well as teach students about sustainability by using local food.

“We want to increase the sustainability of food systems,” Gimpel said. The menu will include dairy-free, gluten-free, lactose-free and a variety of options.

“We definitely want to have options for students that don’t have a lot of options,” Gimpel said. Gimpel wants to provide food for students at a breakeven cost, even if the university might not make a lot of money on the cafe.

“Students can go there and spend their money on healthy food,” Gimpel said, adding the idea for the cafe came from students needing a place on campus to get healthy food.

Education is important, Gimpel said, especially knowing where the food you eat is grown.

“There’s so many different things Western’s doing to have a sustainable culture. Educating students on it is so important,” Gimpel said.

Staying local is important environmentally and sustainability wise, Gimpel said.

“When you have local food, you’re traveling less and emitting less greenhouse gas emissions,” Gimpel said.

Gimpel started working on the cafe in Spring 2014 in the Appropriate Technology and Sustainability Class taught by Harold Glasser, an environmental and sustainability studies professor at WMU.

“[The class] challenged me to think differently. It wasn’t a typical college class,” Gimpel said.

The original idea for the cafe emerged in 2007 from WMU alumnus Ashley Norton who was enrolled in Harold Glasser’s Appropriate Technology and Sustainability class.

The cafe has been in development for eight years because plans are often put on hold when students graduate, said Beth Jarl, one of the WMU interior design faculty who assigned the cafe to students as a project.

“Communication becomes a challenge,” Jarl said.

Derek Kanwischer, coordinator of sustainability projects for the Office for Sustainability, said the office works with students to create sustainability initiatives to enact on campus. These initiatives come from students recognizing that the university can more sustainable, Kanwischer said.

“Identify some of the major problems, and then solve them,” Kanwischer said. One goal was to create a sustainable cafe with food, but also with sustainable space.

“It’s to provide a venue, a space where students can come together,” Kanwischer said.

Gimpel said she hopes to put the cafe in the basement of the Bernhard Center, but there’s no guarantee.

[Studio II Class Concepts for the Sustainable Café](#)