Currently, the carbon neutrality goal for WMU is 2065. This is simply not good enough. However, there is currently a push to move it up to 2050 and cutting carbon emissions in half by 2030. To help push this carbon neutrality goal forward and encourage sustainability across campus, more money should be put towards new and existing efforts.

Several existing efforts are being carried out by 12 students and 2 full time staff members at the Office for Sustainability.

WMU already has a wealth of sustainability knowledge and passion at the Office for Sustainability. However, in recent years, we have experienced several cuts to our staff and budget. In a time where much of the world is trying to encourage more sustainability, WMU is holding us back. One of our most beneficial programs, the Gibbs House Fellowship was cut back in 2019. We couldn’t afford the necessary fixes to the house, and we couldn’t afford to support 4-5 fellows to stay in the house anymore. These fellows were an integral part of the Office for Sustainability and the Gibbs House. They took care of the land, they grew food to donate to the community, they taught other students that come to volunteer at the Gibbs House, they helped push forward other sustainability initiatives which they would take a leading role in. In addition to losing the fellowship, other staff members have been cut as well. Both full time staff members and students. This was happening even before the pandemic. This means programs we used to have and knowledge that used to get passed down to new employees have been lost.

Despite these cuts, we have done a lot with the little amount of money and staff that we have. Starting in the Fall of 2020, we began a large-scale composting program that is currently diverting all the pre-consumer food waste from the Valley Dining Center and the Bernhard Center’s Grab’n Go location. We have since diverted about 6,093 pounds of food waste during the Fall 2020 – Summer 2021 semester, and about 6,613 pounds of food waste in the Fall of 2021 alone. We have enough room in our compost piles to take on more food waste, we just need more staff members to do so.

Additionally in 2021, we have reestablished a lot of our garden areas to grow food for the community. In 2020, much of the area could not be taken care of since none of our student employees could work during the summer. In 2021, we were able to grow and donate about 1,082 pounds of food. This food has been given to students either through events that the office holds or through the Invisible Needs food pantry. A very small portion of that was also given to Loaves and Fishes, which is a food pantry for that Kalamazoo community. Although we have been able to return some of our space back to useable land for growing food using regenerative agricultural practices, not all of our garden space is being utilized because we do not have enough employees to work all of the land.

Therefore, some of the most important changes that could help the Office for Sustainability would be:

1. Rehabilitate the Gibbs House and bring back the fellowship program.
2. Fully fund the compost program (mostly by hiring more employees) to be able to compost all of the food waste on campus.
3. Fully fund the Gibbs House regenerative agriculture program (mostly by hiring more employees) to be able to teach more students and grow more food to donate to more students.

This is also an educational space for students and the community. At the Gibbs House, we teach students about regenerative agriculture, composting, basic garden skills, how to care of trees and other plants, and many other sustainable practices. We do this through weekly volunteer hours, schedule group volunteer hours, and tours of the Gibbs House space. In the Fall 2021 semester alone, we have had over 145 volunteers. At the Office for Sustainability, we hold a weekly bike shop to help students fix their bikes and teach students how to fix bikes themselves. The bike shop also has a bike rental program and inclusive bike rides where they take easy bike rides around the community. Additionally, the office has an art wall that shows off student’s sustainable art, and we also hold yearly events (e.g. Halloween, Sustainability Celebration, Spring Gardening) and workshops/chats. Some workshop/chat topics include composting, information about fast fashion, preserving/canning food, DIY sustainable crafts such as wood carving, and more. Lastly, every semester we give out money to students who want to do sustainable projects through the Student Sustainability Grant. As much as we are trying to keep all of these current initiatives going, it has been difficult with the limited amount of employees and we have had to cut a lot of initiatives. You can read about all of our past and current initiatives on our website.

There are many positive impacts that funding the Office for Sustainability and the Gibbs House more could have. (I have the most experience with composting, so let me first talk about the impacts that fully funding the composting program could have):

The composting initiative benefits students on campus in several ways. Our final compost product has been offered to students who can bring their own container to the Office for Sustainability or the Gibbs House to pick up as much as they would like for their own potted plants or gardens. The compost is also used to help grow food at the Gibbs House site. This food is donated to students through the Invisible Needs Project, which is a free food pantry on campus for any WMU student. Additionally, the final compost product has been given to landscape services at WMU for use on campus grounds and plotted plants. If we were able to make more compost, landscape services would need to spend less money on the nutrient rich soil that they use around campus.

Furthermore, the composting projects have been used for educational purposes. For example, we have partnered with students and professors in the Biology Department that test our soil for nutrient content, microorganisms, and other important parameters. One biology master’s student and one Lee Honors College student have made their thesis about testing our compost product. In 2019, we began open volunteer hours for composting to allow students to have hands on experience. One student made composting at the Gibbs House her peak project for the Signature Program at WMU, which any student can participate in. Additionally, this composting program and our gardening program will continue to be open for students to make it their peak project for a sustainability signature or a part of any student’s thesis work. I have presented about composting at the Lee Honors College, a residence hall, and the Association for Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) conference to increase student’s knowledge about composting. We have coordinated with Facilities Management and Dining Services because of their increased interest in ramping up this composting program. In the past, we had Bronco Buckets program (currently shut down due to COVID and lack of staffing) to get several departments involved in the composting process. This program gave out buckets to over 20 departments on campus so they can put food waste in the buckets (usually placed in staff kitchens) that we collect once a week. There has been a noticeable increase of interest in composting on campus demonstrated by the above examples and this proposal would help continue this successful trajectory.

Less noticeably, but maybe more importantly, increasing the amount of food waste that gets composted will therefore decrease the amount that goes to the landfill. This can improve the quality of the air, water, soil, and food locally and more broadly. This will have a positive impact on WMU students and the overall community.

Our gardening program's impact:

Completely funding our regenerative agricultural program would allow us to donate more sustainable, healthy food to students grown locally in Kalamazoo. Food poverty and food insecurity are huge problems that we should work to completely eliminate at WMU and Kalamazoo as a whole. We would also be able to empower more students to be able to grow their own food sustainably. Furthermore, giving out food that has been grown locally is better for the environment. There are so many educational opportunities we could tap into for our students if we fully funded the Gibbs House gardening space. Additionally, the Gibbs House is a place that further improves the overall health of students by getting a lot of exercise as well as improved mental health by being outside working the land. volunteers also have a sense of community by working with other students who want to have a closer connection with the land and each other. I see several returning volunteers every Friday making friends at the Gibbs House.

Rehabilitate the Gibbs House and bring back the fellowship program’s impact:

There is an unlimited amount of stuff to learn at the Gibbs House. Some things that students learn about include composting, growing food, landscaping, plant identification, food preservation/canning, and some skills with tools because of some light mechanical maintenance. The goal of bringing back the Gibbs House is the most important to us because without maintaining the Gibbs House, it would be very difficult to work on this land. The house is needed especially for food preparation and food storage. It is needed to take a break in when it is very hot in the summer and very cold in the winter. Additionally, funding the fellowship program would help support the composting, gardening program, bike program, and all of the other initiatives that we want to continue and the ones that we want to bring back.

We love WMU. That’s why we are studying here and working at the Office for Sustainability. We just know it can be better. Please contact me if you want more information about any of this. I could talk about my love for the Office for Sustainability and the Gibbs House all day.