

WASTE AND LANDFILL EXPERIENCE

EXCERPTED ARTICLE BY JOHN WIEGAND

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In a position with the West Michigan Sustainable Business Forum (WMSBF), Collaborative Design student, Leslie Yarhouse, worked alongside a team of biochemists and other scientists, digging through bags of trash to gather data for a waste characterization study the WMSBF is undertaking in pursuit of grant funding from the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ).

So what role does a design student play in mulling over mounds of trash and drafting reports for the government?

In addition to physically sorting through waste, Yarhouse conducted an extensive review of the methods and benchmarks other communities employ in the order to better manage waste. She then had to communicate her findings to her team members in a way that brought a broader perspective to the group's efforts to more deeply understand the problem of waste management here in West Michigan.

Yarhouse has a keen interest in matters of sustainability, but her internship wasn't only concerned with exploring different waste management techniques; she also had to help her teammates ensure that their findings were presented in a way that aligned with rigid expectations of the DEQ's grant program. While methodology is certainly a critical tool in solving the wicked problem of waste management, Yarhouse quickly learned that funding is just as important.

Dan Schoonmaker, director of the WMSBF and Yarhouse's supervisor, says the project involved much more than sifting through and analyzing trash.

"We were asking Leslie to interface with several different types of recyclers, with economists, with garbage-truck drivers and regulators, and other interns from several different majors. She went from problem solving on the face of a landfill to reviewing economic literature over the course of a week. I think that collaborative, design-based approach was essential to her success. She was able to understand the overarching goal and how all the various perspective fit into it."



Image above, courtesy of Kristen Wieland, Kent DPW. Top two images courtesy of WMSBF.