Blight Busters Feasibility Study

Prepared for:
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Executive Summary

Even though Blight Busters has been able to successfully sustain itself as a non-profit business in Detroit these past 27 years, we believe that they could improve certain areas of their business, which would make them a more efficient organization.

  The main areas of concern are:
- The Blight Busters website and event calendar
- Marketing of their business using social media
- Possible internship positions and more volunteers in accordance with Wayne State

These alternatives will be evaluated along the criteria of cost effectiveness, perceived interest, marketability, and usability. These criteria will help determine how beneficial each of the alternatives are for the future successes of Blight Busters.

A phone interview with the owner of Blight Busters, John George, provided important information on how the business first originated, and how they have been able to fund their projects throughout the years. After this interview, two surveys were written and then conducted with Wayne State students. These surveys helped to clarify exactly what needed to be worked on with Blight Busters. More specifically, they supported the notions that the website and the overall connection between them and Wayne State needs to be improved.

Additional secondary sources from different websites, organizations, businesses, and universities were also used to then support and provide possible solutions to the concerns mentioned above.

This feasibility report will conclude that improvements in the website and a connection with Wayne State are the best methods to help increase Blight Busters community outreach and Detroit revitalization.

Introduction

A feasibility report has been chosen to help Blight Busters improve their community outreach, participation, webpage, and online presence, helping them to be a more well-rounded, easy to approach organization. Blight Busters has raised close to 20 million dollars and has worked on over 1,500 properties since it began 27 years ago. This organization has accomplished a substantial amount for Detroit, but minor changes could lead to major improvements. We want to continue the advancement in Detroit by helping an establishment that's already making a difference.

By providing more organization and accessible information to the community, Blight Busters would continue to increase awareness of blight in the city and lead to more involvement from outside sources. There is a lack of activity on their website along with their social media sources. The owner of Blight Busters, John George, wishes that there were more Wayne State students available to help out. We will provide alternative ways that could possibly resolve the website problems and the lack of student commitment from Wayne State with Blight Busters. These ways are to connect Blight Busters with Wayne State through service learning and internships, to improve their website by making it more user friendly, and to increase their marketing so people can easily access their events.

Figure 1. Blight Busters Statistics

Overview of Alternatives

Alternative 1: Improve website. The Blight Busters' page provides great material on the organization's past accomplishments, but it lacks important information that volunteers may need to know.

Alternative 2: Service Learning. Blight Busters and Wayne State students alike will benefit from a service learning program with Blight Busters as the community partner. The organization will gain helpful volunteers who will learn the importance of addressing social issues.

Alternative 3*: *Internships. If Blight Busters expands their internship department to include an administrative intern from Wayne State that is qualified to do design, promotion, and marketing, Blight Busters will have a consistent and well-rounded web presence that will help contribute to the successes of the organization.

Research Methods and Results

374,938 properties surveyed

Structures vs Lots
- yes, no: 1
- structures: 261,053
- lots: 113,867

Structure Condition
- suggest demolition,
- good: 211,567
- fair: 32,050
- poor: 12,695
- sugg. demo: 4,688

Structure Occupancy
- possibly occupied: 1
- maybe, occupied: 2
- partially occupied: 1
- partial, occupied, oc
- occupied: 199,366
- unoccupied: 49,671

Lots with Dumping: 6,837

Structures with Fire Damage: 8,436

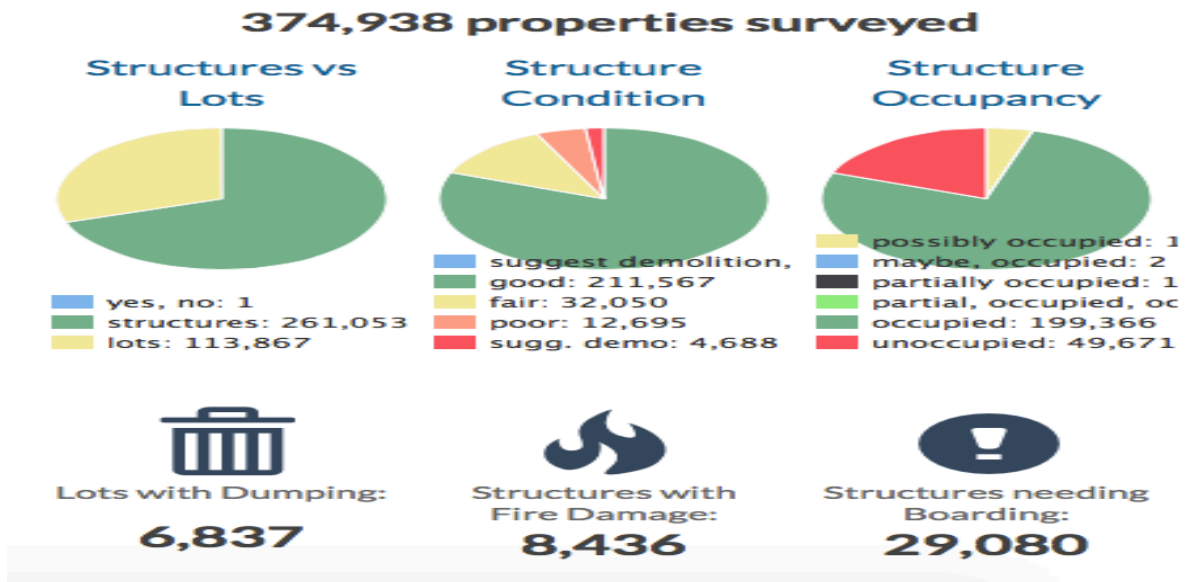Structures needing Boarding: 29,080

Figure 2. Graph of Detroit Blight

According to figure 2, these numbers provide a quantitative set of data giving us information on the amount of blight in Detroit. Since there is a large quantity of neglected homes and lots, we, as Detroiters should naturally be supportive of local businesses like Blight Busters that help alleviate this blight problem. Taking this into consideration, we have conducted and researched ways that may improve Blight Busters popularity, thus, making their business more effective with this increase of community outreach.

Our first base of research looked into urban blight and service learning communities at Wayne State. We then compared the current learning communities at Wayne State to other universities to see how they could connect with smaller institutions in the nearby area. Service learning courses are designed in such a way that students' educational requirements are met while they are also addressing important community issues. According to Fayetteville State University, service learning is a great experience for students because "students work on real problems that make academic learning relevant while simultaneously enhancing their social skills, analytical ability, civil and ethical responsibility, self-efficacy, and career development."

Service learning is a requirement for all students enrolled in the Honors College at Wayne State University. Volunteer work is valued by the Honors College and it is a good way for students to help the community and realize how much the city of Detroit in particular is in need of all the help it can get. There is a required course, Political Science 1010 with Honors, that all freshmen in the Honors College must take. For part of this class it is necessary that students, in groups,

identify an urban problem, write a report on that particular issue, and volunteer with an organization that works to eliminate or alleviate the issue. Urban decay and the overabundance of blight in Detroit is a very noticeable problem and one that demands attention. It is common to see dilapidated property all over the city. It would be advantageous for both the students and the Motor City Blight Busters if this PS 1010 project was focused on urban decay.

Along with this project, another service learning requirement must be fulfilled by Honors students. This course, Honors 3000, pairs students with a community partner while they receive credit towards a particular course. This is typically done by students volunteering at Detroit k-8 schools tutoring kids on how to read, or by registering for the Summer in the City course where they do community service for 8 weeks in the summer as well as learn about the community. If Blight Busters were to be made available to students through the Honors College then they could volunteer during the fall or summer terms and earn service-learning credit.

Research was conducted on the effectiveness of service learning projects as well as what makes service learning effective. Research was also done on what colleges and universities were doing to alleviate the presence of blight in their community. According to McDonald and Dominguez, "Service learning provides many benefits to students, faculty, and communities within the context of a college course. However, to prevent frustration, it is important for faculty members to make a clear distinction between service learning and volunteerism by connecting their course objectives to the service being provided." This is a well-articulated point and it brings up the fact that a service learning project with Blight Busters as a community partner should focus on the impact that volunteer based organizations have on their community.

Along the same lines of Universities partnering with existing organizations to deal with blighted property, there are private Universities that work to help the community remove or repair dilapidated property by invoking eminent domain on the abandoned property. There have been some legal issues surrounding this practice because technically eminent domain cannot be used in favor of private owners or institutions. Josh Hoffman sums up this idea in the following passage from his article on urban blight and private universities. "…If we allowed private universities to take the reins with eminent domain, sustainable urban development could be achievable. If private universities could acquire blighted land, forgotten neighborhoods could be restored, and the general public could rest assured that, because the universities are not-for-profit educational institutions, public property would not be deeded over to profit-seekers in search of cheap real estate." There is an example of this that comes from Benedict College in Columbia, SC. The private college created The Benedict-Allen Community Development Corporation to possess blighted land surrounding the college and clean it up for the community. (Benedict College)

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A Wayne State University professor who is in charge of a summer term service-learning course through the Honors College was contacted via email to explore the possibility of Blight Busters being a community partner in that course. The class is designed to create awareness of social issues in Detroit and provide students with the opportunity to positively impact the future of the city through community service.

Our next section of research and data we collected came from the use of two surveys aimed at Wayne State students. The first survey was conducted online and received 38 responses. The main purposes of this survey was to get an idea on the overall knowledge base about blight in our city and to find out how popular Blight Busters is to Wayne State students.

Have you ever heard of Blight Busters?
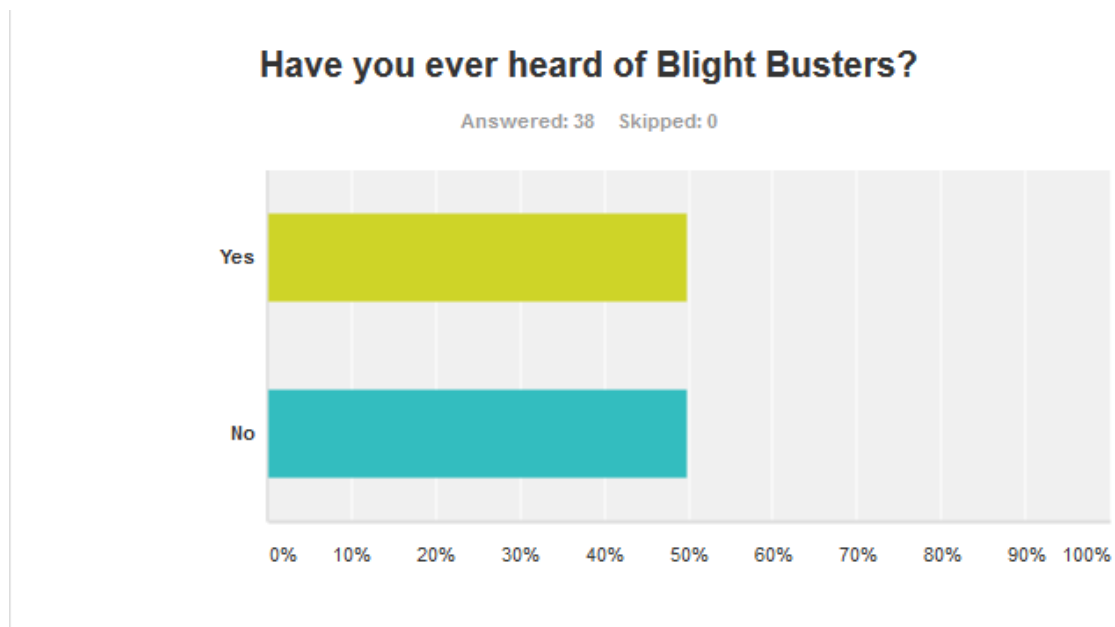
Answered: 38   Skipped: 0

Figure 3. Survey Results: Student Background Knowledge

Results indicated that many students were aware of the blight problem and had a little bit of knowledge on the topic. As indicated by the bar graph above, 50% of the 38 students admitted that they had heard of Blight Busters before, which was very encouraging. Even though this was good news, as figure 4 shows, 90% of the 38 answered said that they had never worked with Blight Busters before.

The second survey did not provide any positive feedback as well. This survey used the exact same questions proposed in the two bar graphs. The results were very similar as well. 65% of the 50 students that were verbally questioned answered that they had heard of Blight Busters from other sources, but a shocking 95% of them replied that they had never worked with this particular blight business before.

Have you worked with Blight Busters?
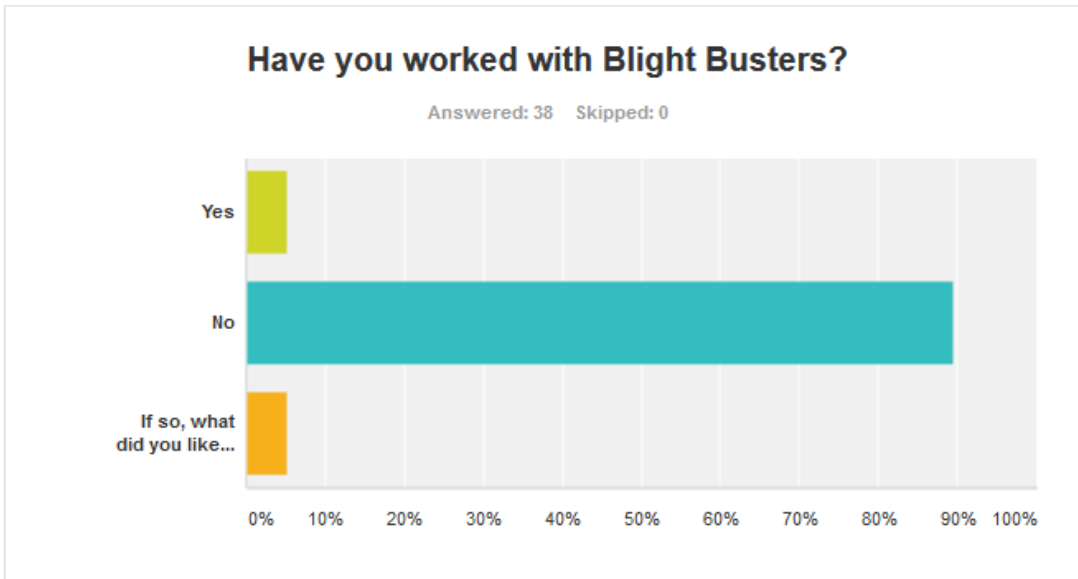
Answered: 38   Skipped: 0

Figure 4. Survey Results: Student Volunteer Experience

This data suggests that John George and Blight Busters need to collaborate and connect more with various Wayne State groups and clubs to continue to develop its popularity with the students. This can be done through the implementation of service learning requirements and various internship positions with Blight Busters, which in turn will help the leaders of Blight Busters continue their great job of working on Detroit's blight.

Criteria

The various proposed alternatives offered to improve the Motor City Blight Busters' marketing and increase their volunteer count were evaluated by certain criteria to determine how practical they are. There were four criteria that were chosen to evaluate the alternatives.

The first criterion is how **cost effective** the proposed option is. Blight Busters is a nonprofit organization and they have various sponsors that fund their projects and they function based on volunteer activity. None of the alternatives should be overpriced. It would make little sense to suggest options that would cost a substantial amount of money. The most appealing options will cost little while still being effective towards accomplishing the goal.

Another criterion for the alternatives is the **perceived interest** of those expecting to volunteer. The options that will be most desirable will have a high perceived interest. A high perceived interest is favorable because people will need to react to the proposed options in order for them to be effective. If an idea is good but it does not take well with the public or gain momentum then overall it is a poor suggestion.

The **marketability** of the alternatives is a criterion as well. The ideas being proposed ultimately need to work towards the goal of increasing Blight Busters advertising and increasing the number of volunteers. The alternatives need to be easily marketed so the ideas can reach the most people while expelling the least amount of time and resources. If an option is particularly marketable, it increases the chances of it getting the attention of the public.

The final criterion is **usability**. This will test how easy the changes are to implement into the plan. In order to be the most beneficial to the organization, the alternatives need to be relatively simple to adapt. Too much struggle in this area will make the options be less appealing.

Evaluations

Solution 1: Improve Blight Busters website by making it more user friendly.
Adding key information such as specific event titles to the event calendar, specific times and dates to the online pages, and keeping the websites updated is an alternative with **low costs** entailed. John George stated in his interview that he already has a team of technical writers that edit the website. This group should be able alter the page and add details every week at little to no cost. If this team of people is unable to make these changes, then there may be a low cost to hire someone to consistently update the events.

The **perceived interest** of updating the site should be high for the directors of Blight Busters and those who edit the website. It would be beneficial for them to make these changes because more people will view the pages and observe the details about when and where they can volunteer. An interest in upgrading the website should be fairly strong because by modifying the website it would make Blight Busters activities more accessible for volunteers, and therefore increasing community participation.

This information will also increase Blight Busters' **marketability** because it advertises when they meet and where. By promoting their information online, it will be available and visible to more people. More people reading this leads to more people knowing about the organization and meetings, which leads to more volunteers and help to clean up Detroit.

Usability for altering the website won't be difficult because Blight Busters already has a technical team in place to make the changes. The degree of difficulty may lie in the level of expertise of the designer of the webpage. That is, how easily they can implement changes. Another obstacle would be constantly updating new events every week as they are scheduled. Overall, this is a relatively usable alternative.

Solution 2: Connect to Wayne State through service learning projects.
The alternative option of Blight Busters partnering with Wayne State Students who are receiving service learning credit was evaluated through the previously stated criteria. When it comes to the **cost effectiveness** of the option, little to no money would need to be invested into accommodating the Wayne State students. Perhaps just whatever cost is associated with any typical volunteer. The fact that there is no foreseeable additional cost will make this option appealing.

The **perceived interest** of this option should be relatively strong especially in Honors students. Honors students are required by Wayne State to complete a service learning course so if Blight Busters was made available to them through Summer in the City or otherwise, they would be volunteering and also receiving credit to learn about social issues in Detroit.

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The **marketability** of this idea is where it gets a bit tricky. There would need to be a way to get Blight Busters message to the students and create an awareness in them and a desire to want to commit their service learning time to dealing with blight in the city. This can be done possible through an informational email sent to all freshmen in the Honors College so that they get thinking about blight removal and how it helps the city become safer and more aesthetic.

The **usability** of this option is not very practical as well. Based on the primary research, it will be relatively difficult to coordinate with Wayne State well enough to establish a service learning partnership that both parties will be able to benefit from.

Solution 3: Connect to Wayne State through internships.

In an interview with John George he mentioned he has a small staff that handles the administrative work and volunteers who handle "technical stuff like web design, putting together projects and programs, flyers, and those kinds of things." The work being done now is volunteered. The majority of student internships are unpaid and are done mostly for the experience therefore if this proposed internship was unpaid it would have no cost to Blight Busters making it very **cost effective**. Having an intern consistently doing online marketing and design work for Blight Busters would be efficient and free.

A majority of degrees require 2 or more internships and students need these work experiences while working on their degree. Blight Busters needs work to be done on their website and social media. Blight Busters is a non-profit organization that may not have a budget for an additional employee. By partnering with WSU, Blight Busters and WSU students will benefit. Employers like to contribute to future success such as giving students working experience. Students need internships to succeed while working towards achieving a degree.

It is in the **perceived interest** of both Blight Busters and Wayne State students to have an opportunity that benefits the organization and university, but the city of Detroit as well as the community.

Marketability is a main concern of the intern. The intern needs to be concerned with reaching the most amounts of people with little amount of time and money. The intern will be responsible for a variety of daily/weekly tasks including website and flyer design, social media, connecting with sponsors, and engaging the community through all of these outlets. Social media is free advertising and low maintenance. An intern with design experience is key to working on the website. There are various departments at Wayne State that would have qualified students for said position such as graphic design, marketing, public relations, environmental engineering, computer programming, or anyone with experience and knowledge of Photoshop and Illustrator. Blight busters can be connected to Wayne State by posting the internship application on the WSU Career Services page and advertise through them as well as posting the internship onto the Blight Busters website.

The **usability** of obtaining an administrative intern will greatly benefit Blight Busters because the problems that have been previously stated are easy to fix. The problem with the website is that although it looks professional and offers a

lot of information, it's not user friendly and the information is outdated. The events link is blank and you have to do some searching around to find the event calendar. Even then, it offers the same two-sentence description per every event for the next year. It would be the intern's responsibility to make the website more user friendly by organizing each section of what already exists and adding new relevant information. For example, the news page of the website has only information from 2013-2014 and even then it doesn't highlight major accomplishments. The website simply needs to be updated. By having the same intern designer edit the website and create flyers, the Blight Busters image will look consistent. The intern will be responsible for distributing the flyers that they've created around Detroit and specifically Wayne State's campus.

Flyers will not be the only form of advertising that the intern would be responsible for. The social media needs to be updated and worked on regularly. Facebook according to John George is one of their best outlets of reaching people. However, Facebook does not offer a lot of information about future projects, just past accomplishments. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are all free platforms that the majority of college students know how to use.
It is easier than ever to link all of these accounts to the website which means that regularly posting to one of these accounts will post to all of them therefore increasing exposure.

Conclusion

After extensive research, we have found that people are aware of Blight Busters but have not been involved in the organization. As John George said, Blight Busters relies on the media to provide the public with information about their accomplishments. The problem with this is that generally, the Blight Busters' website isn't user friendly in that it doesn't include details on how to get involved or provide relevant information. We can conclude that by having a service learning student or intern improve the website, Blight Busters will not only see positive change within their organization but also within the city of Detroit.

This issue is not something crucial that needs to be implemented immediately. However, John George told us that spring/summer is the busiest time for the Motor City Blight Busters. Therefore, implementing our alternatives sooner than later would be in their best interest. As previously stated, the general problem is that the website and social media doesn't provide enough information about getting involved or Blight Busters' recent accomplishments. The current administration could easily update these pages as a small solution, but there's a chance that in the future the same problem will exist. A service learning student and intern are two complementary alternatives that can both be implemented for great successes. Having one or the other would be sufficient but the difference between the two is that service learning is for college credit and an internship is for experience. Considering these two proposed positions will be fulfilled by students it is best that they will occur three times a year, at the beginning of each semester.

John George and the Motor City Blight Busters are making a huge impact on the city of Detroit as well as the community. This organization was started in a successful attempt to protect children from negative influences and 27 years later, it's not only doing that but is making a huge contribution to the revitalization of the city. As Wayne State Students and members of the Detroit community, we propose these alternatives because it is important that Blight Busters is successful and can continue to make positive change in the lives of many.

Recommendation

Based on the evaluation of the three alternatives, the interview with John George, and the surveys, we recommend that Blight Busters use our findings to implement two of our proposed solutions: connecting with a large establishment like Wayne State and make improvements to their website and social media accounts. Adding times and dates to the pages that are easily accessible online would increase potential volunteers' knowledge about contributing to the organization. Just by making this change, Blight Busters will be spreading their name because a majority of people use the internet and social media sites daily, so it's also free advertising. This is the solution that is simple to achieve and can be completed with little to no cost to Blight Busters. It could potentially increase the number of volunteers and help get more work done as well.

This is also the reason we recommend collaborating with Wayne State. There would be a constant source of workers to contribute, and our surveys show that many Wayne State students have heard of Blight Busters and would like to help, but a small amount have actually done it. Bridging the gap between the two could be the reason for more volunteers. This solution is more difficult to implement because it's brand new; all the details must be established, especially when creating a Service Learning Project. This requires more steps and discussion, but the outcome would be most beneficial to both institutions.

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Appendix A

Other questions asked in the online report:

Was there anything in particular that could be improved when working with Blight Busters?Check any points that you felt needed improvement.

Are you interested in telling others about your experience with the demolition, and clean up with BB?

Would you like to see and learn how Blight Busters could potentially connect with related fields? (Construction, environmental clean -up, design, social justice, neighborhood improvement)

If you answered No the question 2, would you like to know more about Blight Busters?

Appendix B
Outline of interview questions for interview with John George.

Background info:
-tell us about your mission and if it's changed over the years
-We read your metro times article from 2008 and were wondering how did you got your business started? Business vs. community outreach
-How have you managed to continue it this long?
-How do you maintain your financing?
-Do you get any funding or backing from the city?
-What are some of the problems you've had getting there?
…lead into some of our alternatives
-look into policies about solving urban decay

Volunteers/interns:
-On average about many volunteers do you get, per project?
-What responsibilities do volunteers/interns have?
-Tell us about your internships either existing or ones you wish to have?
Have you in the past or would you be interested in collaborating with WSU?
-Would you be interested in having WSU students intern/volunteer at Blight Busters for credit and write about their experiences?
Marketing:
-How do you spread the word about Blight Busters?
-How do you get people involved?
-What are some of your goals for marketing blight busters?
-What do you see for the future of Blight Busters?

Appendix C

Outline of interview questions for email interview with Ben Falik of the Wayne State Honors College

1. Can you tell me a little about the community service program?
   • About your mission?
   • About how you started?
   • About how you sustain the organization financially?
   • About your current partnerships?

   2. Can you tell me a bit more about what the service learning partnership with Wayne State is like?
   • Can you comment particularly on what you consider to be a strong service learning experience for a wsu student?
   • Can you tell me what you'd like to see in such partnerships involving wsu students in the near future?

This is a harder question, maybe, but do you think that having students with special interests in engineering work, or social work, or art or other fields might benefit from particular experiences developing these interests in the community work you do?

Appendix D

Images of Blight Busters website that contain little information about getting involved or connect you to other pages that no longer exist.

EVENT CALENDAR

MOTOR CITY BLIGHT BUSTERS

MOTOR CITY BLIGHT BUSTERS DETROIT INC.

ABOUT / EVENTS / 2014 PROJECTS / CONTACT US / NEWS / STORE

GROUP VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Every year, Motor City Blight Busters hosts over 10,000 volunteers through our various programs and initiatives. Check out our **Volunteer & Event Calendar** to see what opportunities exist for you group, join up with an existing volunteer group, or send us a message to coordinate your own volunteer day.

First name *	
Last name *	
Organization	
Group Size *	
Volunteer Interest	◯ Farm City Detroit ◯ Blight Removal ◯ Other
Comments	
Email *	

Donate

SEARCH

SEARCH 🔍

FEATURED

BLIGHT BUSTERS T-SHIRTS

Blight Busters Detroit

| Home | About | Contact Us | My Terms of Service and Privacy Policy | 🔍 |

Nothing Found

It seems we can't find what you're looking for. Perhaps searching can help.

Search ...   [Search]

Search ...

Archives

Appendix E

Where and how to list career opportunities on the Wayne State University Career Services webpage.