The media constantly degrades women, making them feel like they have to look and act a certain way in order to be beautiful. Unfortunately, many women (especially young girls and young women) lead unhealthy lifestyles because they are uncomfortable with themselves. My Action Plan centers around helping girls and women feel more secure with themselves, both physically and mentally. The first step of my Action Plan was to educate myself so that I would be able to work with people who have a negative self-image and, hopefully, help boost their self-esteem. This is where I ran into my first problem. My original idea was to shadow people who had started organizations to help women with body image or self-esteem problems. This way, I would be able to educate myself in a more hands-on way. However, I came to realize that most of the organizations in my area were primarily just websites or blogs, so I would not get to have the hands-on experience that I primarily wanted.

Although this was disappointing, I decided to use books and the internet to do my research. The organizations I had researched back when I was planning my Action Plan actually had very helpful websites and I found a lot of useful information there. In addition to doing research, I also began to outline a lesson plan full of activities and discussion topics that I hoped to use during my workshops with middle school girls. The research step of my Action Plan took a lot longer than I had anticipated because the topic is so broad and so widely studied.

Once I knew more about the root of self-esteem issues and had made a rough lesson plan, I decided to move on to the next step of my Action Plan: raising awareness.
Originally, I planned to raise awareness by writing an article about the issue in the school newspaper. One fact that I had not been aware of while I was creating my Action Plan was that only students in journalism class are allowed to write for the school newspaper, so I could not get my piece published. Instead of admitting defeat, I decided to use my social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr to write mini articles about the negative effects of social media women in our society. I got lots of positive feedback from my friends/followers on these mini articles and it even sparked some interesting debates between me and my real life friends as well as online followers on whether certain shows/ads were negatively portraying women. Additionally, I hung up posters around school every few weeks that said things such as “You’re Beautiful!” and “Stay Positive!” Some of my posters were more serious, containing statistics about the number of young girls who are unhappy with the way they are or information on negative ways the media portrays women.

At this point, although I had tweaked the steps of my Action Plan in order to make them more doable, I was definitely on the right track. The next step of my Action Plan was to lead workshops with middle school girls to help them feel more confident. However, I still wasn’t sure that I would be able to do workshops at middle schools without the help of an official organization (like I mentioned earlier, the organizations in my area were mostly online-based.) So, I decided to focus on a new setting. Instead of focusing on random middle schools where I had little to no connections, why not focus on my own high school? This idea was much more appealing to me because I had easier access to the student body and I knew my friends would be enthusiastic to help out.
Instead of trying to do workshops with my peers, I decided to turn my idea into a club. I pitched the idea of a club to some of my friends and eventually came up with the Healthy Lifestyle Club. Through my research I learned that, although positive self-image workshops are important and effective, it is hard to stay motivated to be positive about yourself in your daily life. One website I was on suggested that, in order to maintain a positive self-image, you have to learn to incorporate fun, healthy activities into your life that make you feel good about yourself and take your mind off of negative things.

Unfortunately, because I was more than halfway through the school year at this point, I could not start a new club until the following school year. At that point, I felt so discouraged because I loved the idea of starting a Healthy Lifestyle Club, but I hated the idea of being virtually inactive with my Action Plan until the next school year.

However, after talking to a few friends about my plan to start a Healthy Lifestyle Club, they suggested that we come up with a list of activities/conversation topics that I wanted to incorporate into the club so that we could all try them out before introducing them to the club. I’m really glad I went to others for help because they gave me the ideas and support I needed to continue moving forward with my Action Plan. I have come to realize that the trial runs of the activities/conversation topics actually helped boost my self-confidence as well as helped me become a more introspective person. Additionally, some of my friends were unaware of the subtle ways in which the media degrades women before I brought it up to them during one of our test conversation sessions. So, although I hadn’t yet started my club, I was already raising awareness. I also noticed some of my friends become more comfortable talking about personal issues with the group as these meetings continued. What I didn’t realize until my friend brought it up was that I had
unintentionally created a support group and we became an unofficial club. As soon as the school year begins, I plan to make the Healthy Lifestyle Club official so that it can spread outside my friend group.

My club will focus on staying physically healthy as well as staying mentally healthy. I plan to take club members on fun hiking or beach trips in order to help them stay active as well as positive. I hope to find someone with yoga/Pilates experience that would be willing to teach a class to members of my club. Also, I think it would be fun to get together and have cooking parties where we make treats. These are just a few of the fun activities I have in mind for the Healthy Lifestyle Club. As for the mental health aspect of my club, I plan to use the time we meet at school to have discussions about body image/the way the media portrays women. I want to be able to ask club members questions such as Does the media make you feel good or bad about yourself? What activities make you feel good about yourself? How does your perception of yourself affect your day to day activities? I would like this club to be a safe zone where people feel comfortable talking about their insecurities or their innermost thoughts.

Back when I was planning my Action Plan, I decided that if my Action Plan helped one person feel more secure with themselves then my plan would be a success. I standby this statement and I do believe that my Action Plan has been successful, however it is in no way complete (I still have to establish an official club at school.) While working on my Action Plan, I have learned to change my leadership style so that I can be a more patient leader. Helping others is not something that can be rushed so I’ve definitely learned to be patient and listen more during the “support group” sessions. The
listening skills and newfound patience has translated into my daily life, mostly when I am interacting with others.

Last but not least, I would like to offer up some advice for Leadership Institute students who are beginning to develop or work on their Action Plans. It is important to keep in mind that you will probably encounter obstacles while working on your Plan, so do not expect everything to go smoothly. Be flexible and use your problem solving skills to ensure that you keep moving forward with your Action Plan. Just remember that you are helping a cause that you care about and in the end it will feel so rewarding to succeed with your Action Plan.