Aaron Mueller had a good job in transportation and logistics, as he had planned while working on his bachelor’s degree. But sitting in an office became confining for him.

“I had always loved everything about the outdoors and realized I wanted a career that not only got me outside, but also was within a field that worked to effectively promote environmental sustainability,” he said.

He started on that path by enrolling in the master of environmental studies program in the Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs at Ohio University. It wasn’t a clear path at first, though.

“All I knew was that I wanted to study something that pertained to an environmental issue in one way or another,” Mueller said.

Because the MSES program is multidisciplinary, Mueller was able to explore different issues to find the one that resonated with him. His work with Geoff Buckley, professor of geography and former director of the MSES program, led Mueller to resource conservation—specifically, sustainable waste management.

“Dr. Buckley expanded my knowledge pertaining to resource conservation by providing a historical context to the issues that we currently face,” Mueller said. “I couldn’t have asked for a better professor to work with over the course of two years.”

The other great influence on his path was working at Ohio University’s Compost Facility. Thanks to the largest in-vessel compost system at any university in the United States, Ohio University composts 100 percent of pre- and post-consumer waste from its dining halls.

“Composting is a serious business and being able to get real experience operating the facility was a tremendous benefit to me,” Mueller said. “It was an awesome experience that I would never have had if I didn’t come to OU.”

Mueller’s Leadership Practicum combined those experiences with other skills learned in the program, especially use of geographic information systems (GIS). He performed waste-flow analysis and economic projections for recyclables for the Appalachia Ohio Zero Waste Initiative, which helps communities in southeastern Ohio work toward a goal of zero waste.

“I was able to utilize my GIS skills here to create maps for the Initiative that visually conveyed our region’s recycling capacity, level of material value, and where materials travel from points of collection through points of processing,” Mueller said. “I learned a lot about how waste materials should optimally be managed in pursuit of sustainability.”
And because the Voinovich School emphasizes building of relationships with policymakers and public agencies, Mueller also made valuable contacts in the sustainability field. Between those and his work at the Voinovich School, Mueller went straight to work after his 2013 graduation with Quasar Energy Group, an Ohio company that creates alternative fuels from organic waste.

"I will get to fulfill my dream of working outdoors, being in the field," he said.

It's a dream he achieved through his own initiative ... with a little help from the Voinovich School's expert faculty and emphasis on learning by doing.

"Ultimately, this program empowered me with everything I needed to better myself intellectually, and it has certainly helped to make me more attractive in the labor market," he said. "I am now leaving the program with a developed, holistic understanding of sustainability and an excellent set of tangible skills."