

# Exploring Strategies to Gain Student Involvement at the Illinois Wesleyan University Peace Garden

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## Abstract

The Illinois Wesleyan University (IWU) Peace Garden is a campus garden located at the liberal arts university in Bloomington, Illinois. The Peace Garden's mission is to meet the culinary and educational needs of student, faculty, and staff at IWU. This study, conducted from January to April 2015, is guided by the following questions: "What factors influence student, staff, and faculty involvement with the Peace Garden?" "What strategies can be used to improve student involvement with the Illinois Wesleyan University Peace Garden?" A literature review was conducted to study curricular learning and student involvement for on-campus gardens. Key informant interviews were conducted with five members of IWU faculty and staff in order to gain further insight into the curricular, faculty, and staff perspectives of the Peace Garden. Interviews with seven students and a focus group with ten students were conducted in order to further evaluate general attitudes towards the Peace Garden, faculty and staff support, and a service or garden-based learning course. Observations were made to view different aspects of the Peace Garden's management and gain qualitative data, deeper description, and open understanding of the interworking of the IWU Peace Garden and other college campus gardens and systems. Through these research methods, it has been determined that there are various barriers to student involvement at the IWU Peace Garden, including communication, outreach, time commitments, lack of knowledge, and general disinterest of gardening from IWU community. Through this research it is recommended that requirements or strong encouragement for Environmental Studies majors and 100-level courses are undertaken. Additionally, the implementation of a garden and service based learning course or "Sustainability 101" course along with the development of an incentive and rewards program for volunteers, volunteering, and Peace Garden Registered Student Organization membership. Lastly, it is recommended that IWU Peace Garden management create a long-term strategy plan for the garden's future.

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## Introduction

In the world today, food security is becoming a matter of concern for whole communities. Issues of access and availability of food in the current food supply presents significant challenges for the future. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations derived from the World Summit on Food Security, "Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (2009)." The solution to food security can be achieved through various outlets, including but not limited to, an investment in sustainable agriculture, gardens, and sustainable community development. Gardens are an alternative to traditional methods of food production and they allow for people to grow their own food. Currently, there is an increasing need to have them integrated system wide. In recent years, there has been an increasing trend of commitment to sustainability through the "greening" of campuses worldwide (The National Wildlife Federation, 2011). A large number of colleges and universities across North America have begun to recognize gardens as an important part of campus sustainability. Additionally, more than 100 higher education institutions have established a garden on their campus (Valluri, 2010). On-campus gardens can be used as a tool for learning, and colleges and universities across the globe have created on-campus gardens for experiential learning purposes (University of Buffalo, 2015). Campus gardens invite diverse participants, and develop communities (Valluri, 2010). Gardens also harness the ability to be an outlet for teaching the broader community about important components of food systems, such as waste avoidance and recycling food for energy through composting and mulching.

In general, campus gardens strive to achieve an overall purpose of improving the quality of life for its campus contributors. Gardens provide adequate space to grow fresh, organic, and local produce while also promoting an atmosphere of community development. Gardens offer a valuable opportunity for service and civic engagement. They provide a unique opportunity to increase student engagement in any university's sustainability efforts. Introductions of garden-based principles to campuses in this form strive to enhance both education and awareness of sustainable practices present on campus (University of Buffalo, 2015). On-campus gardens provide a venue for the enhancement of connecting people with their food sources. They place an emphasis on the role food plays in the overall health of a campus community and the environment. To promote the adoption of sustainable agriculture and educating campuses on these connections is critical (Duram & Williams, 2013, p. 4)." Overall, with support, a garden is a valuable asset to any University for years to come (University of Buffalo, 2015).

One of these institutions committed to sustainability and campus gardens is Illinois Wesleyan University (IWU). The purpose of this research was to assess student involvement at the IWU Peace Garden and to formulate strategies to increase their involvement. This report will first discuss the research purpose and provide an overview of the campus partner and study site used for this study. Additionally, it will explore factors that influence faculty, staff, and student involvement at IWU the Peace Garden. Finally, it will offer recommendations that target specific strategies the IWU Peace Garden can undertake to improve student involvement.

## Research Design and Methodology

### Overview of Research Purpose

The cultivation of gardens on college campuses has become a growing trend over the past decade. Gardens promote nutrition education, food stability, mental and physical health, and access to fresh food. Most of all, gardens influence sustainable behavior and knowledge in garden volunteers and provide a space for environmental education. The IWU Peace Garden was created in 2012 to network and provide organic, local, and fresh produce to its outer community. Since its beginning, a challenge the Peace Garden has faced is maintaining student involvement. Students are only on campus for a few months of the year, and they are only enrolled for about four years. Attempting to maintain a management system that is regulated and sustainable and gaining more curricular involvement have been barriers for the garden. In order for the Peace Garden to achieve its mission of benefiting the curricular and culinary needs of the IWU community, there is a need to find methods to improve student, faculty, and staff involvement for the garden. Gardens are an integral part in the creation of a sustainable society. The Peace Garden needs to be studied because it connects the IWU community to food sources, community engagement, and environmental education.

The study seeks to answer the following question: ***“What factors influence student, staff, and faculty involvement with the Peace Garden?”*** ***“What strategies can be used to improve student involvement with the Illinois Wesleyan University Peace Garden?”***

The IWU Peace Garden is intended to be a tool of civic engagement within the surrounding community and the state (Illinois Wesleyan University, 2015). In order to answer the IWU Peace Garden’s mission, the research focuses on finding methods and perspectives on gaining more student involvement, and the possibility of incorporating the IWU Peace Garden into IWU’s curriculum. The methods will look at the implementation of a garden and service based learning coursework. Also, this research was conducted to find strategies for student, faculty, and staff involvement for the garden. While also focusing on the sustainability of the IWU Peace Garden’s management and seeking a long-term plan for its future.

### Overview of Study Site

The study site for this research was at Illinois Wesleyan University, a private liberal-arts university that is located within the twin cities of Bloomington and Normal, in central Illinois. There are currently 1,893 students enrolled in undergraduate education. There are 80 majors, minors, and programs, and over 200 student organizations (Illinois Wesleyan: Facts, 2015). An excerpt from IWU’s mission statement that related to the IWU Peace Garden is, “The University through our policies, programs and practices is committed to diversity, social justice and environmental sustainability (Illinois Wesleyan University, 2015).”

### Overview of Campus Partner

Since its groundbreaking on April 17, 2012, the IWU Peace Garden has grown as a tool for civic engagement and sustainable education within the IWU community and the local Bloomington-Normal area. The IWU Peace Garden is a half-acre plot of land only a short distance from the IWU Campus, located north of Francis Street and between Fell Street and Prospect Avenue in Normal, Illinois, behind IWU’s practice soccer and football fields. Since its groundbreaking the garden has been able to successfully grow produce seasonally, and it has

its own greenhouse. The greenhouse uses passive solar energy to produce three crops of greens in the fall, winter, and spring. The Peace Garden is sustained under the Action Research Center (ARC), which aims to connect the campus and the community in meaningful ways that create impactful change and address pressing social justice issues (Action Research Center, 2015). The Peace Garden is sustained through an advisory board which consists of: Carl Teichman, IWU's Director of Government and Community Relations, Jim Simeone, IWU Professor of Political Science, Laurine Brown, IWU Environmental Studies Coordinator, Abigail Jahiel, IWU Associate Professor of Environmental & International Studies, William Munro, IWU Betty Ritchie-Birrer '47 and Ivan Birrer Endowed Professor, Deborah Halperin, IWU Director of the Action Research Center, Elyse Nelson Winger, University Chaplain, and Jim Sikora, Chair and Professor of Sociology.

The garden's current management relies on two paid student Summer Co-Garden Managers who work from May-August and two unpaid student interns, Garden Manager and Assistant Garden Manager or Garden Volunteer Development Coordinator, on a semester basis for academic credit or non-academic credit, which is supported by the Environmental Studies Program through the class ENST 397. The number of student interns per semester varies depending on interest from the student population. Jim Simeone is the Faculty Advisor for the IWU Peace Garden.

Currently, the land is under the lease of the Immanuel Bible Foundation (IBF), a Christian non-for-profit located in Normal, Illinois. Currently, the garden is planning to look into closer locations to the campus. The IWU Peace Garden's mission is to "serve the curricular and culinary needs of IWU students. It is intended to be a tool of civic engagement with the surrounding community, the state, and the nation (Illinois Wesleyan University, 2011)." All of the Peace Garden's vegetation is grown organically and the system uses low-impact techniques for garden maintenance, such as push mowers, hand-weeding, etc.

The Peace Garden has been successful with selling produce at the local Uptown Normal Trailside Farmer's Market weekly from June until mid-September. Additionally, the garden sells its produce to two local Bloomington-Normal grocery stores, Common Ground Grocery and Naturally Yours. Within the past two years, the garden has established a weekly campus market which ran through late-August until early December. Garden management holds volunteer days sporadically throughout the year, which is open to the entire campus community. Also, volunteer days have been held for specific campus and community organizations. In the fall of 2014, the Peace Garden established an IWU Registered Student Organization (RSO), an on-campus student club. Meetings were held on a bi-weekly basis, and the spring 2015 semester the RSO meets weekly. The RSO held a Harvest Festival in October of 2014, in which over 35 faculty, staff, and students were in attendance. In the fall of 2014, the RSO also did a potato harvest, through which it donated over 250 lbs. of potatoes to Sodexo, IWU's food service provider, for student consumption. In 2013, the garden provided approximately 600 lbs. of fresh produce to food pantries in McLean County. In 2014, it donated approximately 850 lbs. (Simeone, 2015).

### Description of Research Design

In order to answer the research questions, a variety of research methods were used during the academic semester from January to April of 2015. The research design, outlined below, is an assortment of qualitative methods. Before research was conducted, a proposal for research design and methodology was approved by the IWU Institutional Review Board (IRB), a board with the purpose of assuring that human subject research conforms to Federal regulations (Institutional Review Board at Illinois Wesleyan). All interviewees signed an IRB