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## Action Research Center Links Students to Community

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**Action Research Center Links Students to Community**

July 7, 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Students at Illinois Wesleyan are highly accustomed to enjoying an active-learning, discussion-based atmosphere in the classroom environment. The experience doesn't end there, however, for many who choose to take advantage of one of the University's resources for unique undergraduate internship opportunities.

For nearly 10 years, Illinois Wesleyan's **Action Research Center** (ARC) has taken hands-on learning to a whole new level by connecting students with not-for-profit service, citizen groups and private-sector firms in the Bloomington-Normal area. Through internships and research projects with various local organizations, ARC allows Illinois Wesleyan students to take the initiative in making lasting community improvements.

ARC accomplishes its role as bridge-builder between the University and the community by "getting students out of their comfort zones," said Professor of Sociology Jim Sikora, who co-founded the program with Chair of Political Science Jim Simeone in 2003. "I tell my students it's not good enough to look at a problem and think, "someone should do something about that," added ARC Program Coordinator Deborah Halperin. "I want them to realize they are that someone."

Sikora and Simeone created ARC in an effort to pay more attention to students not entrenched in the "professional golden road" of law school, medical school and the CPA exam. "What do the liberal arts offer you? A well-rounded education that trains you for just about anything," said Simeone. "A lot of our students are happy to get a high GPA, but it's not enough because they also want to be engaged citizens. That's what ARC is all about. It helps you get out there and find your purpose."

Before ARC, Simeone and Sikora noticed that Illinois Wesleyan student interaction with the community, while valuable, was often too short-term to reap long-term benefits. "Just when an organization would get a student trained for the job, they'd have to watch him or her leave because the semester would be over," said Simeone. Sikora explained to ensure real results, ARC now seeks only projects that require at least two semesters to complete, because both he and Simeone believe Illinois Wesleyan students are capable of making great strides for community groups – as long as they have the proper direction and enough time. "Life isn't a syllabus," said Sikora. "Long-term commitment is what builds the foundation for students to become agents of change."

"It's about building trust," added Simeone. "That's where the magic happens."

Whether that involves an individual student designing a proactive research honors project, a professor seeking a good fit for curricular goals, or a community organization searching for volunteer assistance, Halperin said ARC can facilitate not only the necessary conversations to get the ball rolling, but also the interactions to get the job done. "ARC plays matchmaker;



Melissa Seeborg '13 is spending her summer ARC internship researching budget expansion and working with children at Milestones Early Learning Center and Preschool. ARC internships are unique for providing interactive leadership opportunities in the not-for-profit sector.

we're the glue," she said. "We look at the University and community's common resources and interests and we see what strengths and priorities fit together, kind of like puzzle pieces."

Halperin said ARC thrives on the vast variety of perspectives and interests Illinois Wesleyan students of all majors bring to the table. "You want to work in city government? You want to be part of a neighborhood revitalization project? You want to plant a community garden? You want to work with teen moms or inner-city kids? We can get you there," she said. "ARC gives you the opportunity to create something that wasn't there before."

Although Simeone and Sikora originally designed the program to follow a seminar-internship-independent study sequence, they quickly discovered that not all Illinois Wesleyan students had room in their busy schedules for such rigid structure. "We've had to make rolling adjustments," said Sikora, noting that Halperin is "brilliant" at assessing what a student is ready for and matching each individual with his or her personal goals. "Rather than turn people away from ARC, we've tried to bring them in at whatever level they're ready."

Halperin, whose 20-year experience in the not-for-profit sector includes working for the American Red Cross, Planned Parenthood and Mothers Against Drunk Driving, believes the most important thing students gain from ARC is the same characteristic potential post-grad employers find most impressive: concrete field experience. "Honestly, your resume gets about 30 seconds," she said, noting that regardless of career choice, former program participants overwhelmingly report drawing on their ARC experiences when navigating the work world after college. "Across the board, practical experience is what gives you the edge, what pops. ARC gives students a perspective and a depth that really makes them stand out."

Simeone believes students gain special organizational and analytical skills through the ARC experience because of its particular emphasis on active involvement. "A lot of times students are put in an internship and told what to do and they do it," said Simeone. "But ARC internships go beyond that. They create leadership abilities by making you figure out for yourself how to move from one set of goals to another, how to create a new set of goals. That's how ARC students become the missing link in civic engagement."

Halperin also emphasized the importance of civic responsibility. "We're in the business of creating community leaders," she said. "When you move to a new community, I want you to know how to function as a part of it. I want you to pick up the paper, I want you to get involved with not-for-profits, I want you to vote, give blood, volunteer, go to city council and school board meetings. I want you to find your space in that web of networks and do good."

Student Senate President Steve Lessaris, class of 2012, believes ARC has both prepared him for future challenges and given him the opportunity to embrace his own sense of civic duty. As part of the summer internship program through ARC and State Farm Insurance Co., Lessaris is examining emerging technological trends in State Farm's strategic resources department while also redesigning the website and creating an online newsletter for Habitat for Humanity of McLean County. He said his ARC experience has helped him brainstorm ways to bring the community to Illinois Wesleyan's campus, and vice-versa. "My college experience will never be the same," said Lessaris, a political science major, history minor from Champaign, Ill. "I've been given a glimpse of how community organizations work incessantly to provide services and fill gaps no one else is watching. My goal through this internship is to develop alongside my peers a greater sense of community and a deeper sense of giving."

Political science major Lauren Contorno from Park Ridge, Ill., class of 2012, is splitting her summer ARC internship between State Farm's catastrophe services department and Marcfirst, a non-profit organization providing support to people with developmental disabilities. "Instead of simply doing theoretical exercises, I've been challenged to take on real projects in the community that have practical results," she said. "That has been very rewarding. At ARC, the real world is your classroom."

Those involved with ARC believe this encouragement to get your hands dirty enhances not only the Illinois Wesleyan experience today, but also what students and community members can continue to gain from it in the future. "ARC attracts mover, shaker, social-change types who consider the larger community to be part of their personal experience," said Halperin. "If you're ready to jump in, ARC will deliver on that. But you'd better be prepared to work really hard. You'd better be able to deliver, too."

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