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From Inquiry to Action

Nancy Steele Brokaw '71

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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From Inquiry to Action

Illinois Wesleyan's ARC brews a potent mix of student research and community involvement.

**Story by NANCY (STEELE) BROKAW '71
Photos by MARC FEATHERLY**

It's Friday morning, a time when most Illinois Wesleyan students can be found in classrooms, labs, studios and rehearsal rooms. But a few blocks west of campus, one IWU student finds herself in the middle of a very different kind of learning environment.

Linda Ruan, a junior English-writing major, smiles with satisfaction as she watches her college work in action: a new drop-in program for adults with developmental disabilities.

Many University students volunteer their time to worthy causes. Ruan, however, is among a growing number who serve the local community and receive academic credit for doing so.

Illinois Wesleyan's Action Research Center (ARC) develops projects that combine students' research interests with the needs of non-profit community groups. One such group is Marcfirst, which offers services and support for adults with developmental disabilities.



Through ARC, junior Linda Ruan (right) helped launch a new program for developmentally disabled adults in Bloomington.

Many of these adults lost their jobs and recreation programs when the state slashed human service budgets. Marcfirst, in collaboration with the Second Presbyterian Church, enlisted ARC's aid to help address the problem. The result: FriendsFirst, created to provide a safe haven and social network for developmentally disabled adults who might otherwise be sitting at home with little to do.

Ruan helped get FriendsFirst up and running. Building on work by ARC interns who came before her, she set up a database of potential volunteers and participants. "My role was

background work,” she says, “but it’s fun to come here on Fridays and see my work in action.” She plans to continue as a volunteer for the program after her internship ends.

Marcfirst is one of many community organizations that have partnered with University faculty and students through ARC. Ongoing action-research internships include researching grant opportunities for a child welfare agency, developing a business plan to help area organic farmers, analyzing affordable housing conditions and aiding efforts to preserve rural waterways.

When asked to describe the center’s role in these projects, ARC Program Coordinator Deborah Halperin says, “We get in the middle. We’re bridge-builders, dot-connectors, glue.”

In planning ARC internships, Halperin says she requests “meaty” projects, asking partner organizations to “give us something off your wish list that you want accomplished. Something that will help you move forward.”

“Community work is hard,” Halperin adds. “It’s not neat and tidy, not syllabus friendly.” In fact, for Halperin’s ARC internship seminar class, students typically receive just half of the course syllabus. As for the rest, she tells them, “Let’s see what happens.”

The unpredictability of this process can be a singular experience for students more accustomed to the structured routine of classes, tests and papers. Also unlike typical academic work, real people stand to benefit — or not — based on efforts they put into their community projects.



Sikora shares ideas with ARC community partner Loretta Thirtyacre of Country Financial.

“Students are put in situations where they really have to think for themselves,” says Jim Simeone, chair and associate professor of political science. “They learn how to run meetings and take minutes. They learn how to write a grant. ... It’s a marriage of liberal arts education and hands-on projects.”

Simeone collaborated with Professor of Sociology Jim Sikora to launch the Action Research Center in 2004. Prior to its creation, both professors attempted, with difficulty, to coordinate projects with students and community organizations within their own departments.

“There was so much outreach that needed to be done with the students,” says Simeone. “We realized this needed to be a University program.”

From early on, Bloomington-headquartered State Farm Insurance Companies has provided major funding for ARC, including ongoing support of a summer internship program — part of the

corporation's "responsibility to support the communities where we live and work," in the words of State Farm chair/CEO and IWU alumnus Edward Rust Jr. '72.

State Farm also lent its support to hire Halperin, who Sikora says has been a key player in ARC's success. With more than 20 years of experience with non-profit and community organizations, Halperin "has the mind of a manager, and sees many angles and levels at once," says Sikora.

Halperin regards herself as a multi-sided matchmaker, taking, for example, the request of a University professor and matching it with a community partner's needs and the right student for the job. "Students come from all years and backgrounds," Halperin tells potential community partners. "No matter who you're looking for, there is probably an IWU student for you."

ARC partnerships often become long-term. Lyn Hruska, executive director of the American Red Cross of the Heartland, will be getting her fourth Action Research intern this summer. "We feel very fortunate," she says. "The ARC program gives us access to wonderful talent and a youthful point of view, plus deepening ties with Illinois Wesleyan. We hope our relationship continues for many years."

Chair and Professor of Hispanic Studies Carolyn Nadeau is also a frequent user of ARC's matchmaking skills. "This local field component is invaluable to students in its own right and is also key to understanding the theoretical information we discuss in the classroom," she says.

The flexibility and relevance of ARC's work impressed Elizabeth Weir '50, a sociology major at IWU and long-time community activist. In 2008, Weir established a fellowship in her name that helps support students financially as they work on ARC projects with community partners.

"It's important, this idea of giving back," reflects Weir. "It's more than giving back, it's making friendship and connections that last a lifetime."

Kenny Woodard, a senior political science major, is one of two current Weir Fellows. Among other things, Woodard works with Habitat for Humanity to develop marketing strategies that will improve ties with churches on Bloomington's West Side neighborhoods. His previous service work included mentoring low-income, handicapped and first-generation students to help them succeed in college.

"I am always astonished at the few degrees of separation



Participating in the Action Research seminar gave Matt Hill '12 a chance to receive academic credit for helping in community projects such as a reading program for elementary students.

between a person who has a community project in mind and getting that project accomplished,” he says. “Once a student begins to ask questions about community concerns, they are pointed in the right direction [by ARC] to find the actionable answers.”

Senior Heather DeLong’s ARC journey began in a “Spanish for Social Justice” course taught by Nadeau. ARC matched her with Habitat for Humanity to work as a translator, interviewing Hispanic families whose houses had been built by Habitat.

For DeLong — a Hispanic studies major and international studies/music minor — the experience was exhilarating. “To go and knock on someone’s door and ask them about their life was a little nerve-wracking,” she says. “But we had interviews where we just continued talking after our questions were done. We talked about their children, their lives, our studies.”

Last summer, DeLong continued her association with ARC as an intern in the State Farm Community Partnership Program. Each summer, 10 Illinois Wesleyan students are selected for the program, designed to “demonstrate for emerging student leaders how for-profit and not-for-profit organizations can align to serve the shared community,” according to the ARC Web site. These full-time, paid interns split their workweek with three days at State Farm and two days out in the community with not-for-profit partners.

“I haven’t seen it on other campuses with undergrads,” Sikora says of the State Farm Partnership Program, now in its fourth year. “It’s a unique partnership of business, not-for-profit, students, university and community.”

During her two weekly community days, DeLong continued her work at Habitat, creating Spanish-language pamphlets and presenting a program in Spanish to potential new homeowners. At State Farm, DeLong was assigned to a project that involved making safe-driving videos in Spanish.

“Before, I’ve always been told what to do and how do it,” DeLong reflects. “It was mind-boggling there. They just told me to do something. It really developed my creative side.”

As a community education leader in State Farm’s public affairs division, Tom Laxton has worked with many IWU students through ARC. “The thing that I’m most impressed with,” Laxton says, “is that we thought we were working to develop leaders for tomorrow. But the reality is that they’re making significant differences in communities today around issues and needs that the community faces.”

Placing students in environments where they can truly make a difference is one of Halperin’s priorities. As ARC intern and history/Spanish major Erin Bradley ’10 puts it, “ARC interns are not just making copies or getting coffee. Deborah sees to that. You have to have responsibilities.”



State Farm community education leader Tom Laxton discusses a new Promise Council initiative with senior Erin Bradley and ARC Program Coordinator Deborah Halperin.

Through the Action Research Center, Bradley helped launch “Radio Latino,” an all-Spanish weekly radio broadcast on the University’s student-run WESN 88.1 FM. When the program first aired in 2008, there was no other Spanish-speaking media in the Bloomington-Normal area, despite a growing Hispanic population. Bradley — who has continued her work on the show long after her internship ended — locates and invites Spanish-speaking guests from the community to come in for interviews.

“The whole idea of action research is so cool to me,” Bradley says. “You’re doing research and actively helping people. I grew up in Bloomington-Normal and this really opened my eyes and pulled me out of the Wesleyan

bubble. It’s such a great way to connect to the community.”

Through ARC, Bradley is now working to establish Promise Councils at local schools that connect community resources to help disadvantaged students succeed.

“I thought I knew what I wanted to do after college,” says Bradley, “but now I’ve found my life’s work. I’m applying to grad schools to get a degree in social service administration. I now know that’s what I’m supposed to be doing.”

Many current students and alumni report being sparked with that same sense of purpose through their action-research experiences. As a former Community Partner intern, Heidi Adams ’09 worked with the American Red Cross to create a community disaster education program for renters. The experience helped influence her decision to work for Marcfirst after graduating last year.

Among Adams’ ARC projects was a survey of graduates who had interned in the program.

“For a majority of people, it helped them with career choices,” says Adams. “They found something they loved to do or something they didn’t want to pursue.”

Several of the ARC alumni reported that they gained more confidence in the workplace, Adams says. As interns, they learned how to confront complex problems that arise and how to effectively solve those problems.

As importantly, says Simeone, ARC helps students develop the skills they need to become more engaged as “active citizens and leaders of their communities” after graduation.

For Adams, one of the most telling survey answers was a response to the question, “What was the most valuable experience you had in the Action Research seminar?”

The response: “Learning what I was made of, mostly.”