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Vi Kakares '20
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Interfaith Fights Hunger and Poverty on Annual Service Day

Nov. 11, 2016

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— With Thanksgiving just around the corner, many of us would agree with Anna Kerr-Carpenter '17, the president of IWU Interfaith, that November “is a very food-packed month.”

For many people, however, November, or any month, is far from “food-packed.” Approximately 15.8 million households in the U.S. are food insecure, according to the World Hunger Education Service. Food insecurity describes a state in which families do not have adequate access to food because of limiting factors such as a lack of money or resources. These families, according to the USDA, are hungry, or at risk of hunger.

As an Illinois Wesleyan University registered student organization dedicated to creating a more peaceful world through mutual respect and understanding between faith and non-religious traditions, IWU Interfaith also actively gives back to the community. The group recently sought to combat poverty and hunger on the third annual Interfaith Service Day entitled “Harvesting Help.” More than 30 participants began the day by repackaging about 1,000 pounds of rice for distribution to Bloomington's Center for Hope food pantry and to protesters near the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota. Other service projects included volunteering at Bloomington's Midwest Food Bank and building a hoop house and other work for Illinois Wesleyan's Peace Garden.



Brianna Miulli '18 (left) and Tanya Gupta '17 show team effort in prepping soil in the Peace Garden. (Photo by Vi Kakares '20)



Students repackaged rice for distribution to Bloomington's Center for Hope food pantry.

It's one thing for students to spend a few hours prepping the soil for planting at the Peace Garden, or pouring rice into a funnel for repackaging. It is much more difficult to understand the magnitude of food insecurity and why this volunteer work makes a difference. Participant Paul O'Toole '20 noted that, as college students, “we have our meal plans and it's really hard to realize how many people this affects in the community because we're in the Illinois Wesleyan bubble.” With SAGA serving unlimited amounts of food, and the Dugout and Tommy's just steps away at all times, students living at Illinois Wesleyan have sufficient access to food on a daily basis. It's easy to be oblivious to the issue of food insecurity, participants said.

In an effort to raise students' awareness, Professor William Munro led a food insecurity simulation. One group of students assumed personas of those living in food deserts, which are typically defined geographic areas where it is very difficult to access grocery stores and other local food sources. The Betty Ritchie-Birrer '47 and Ivan Birrer Endowed Professor, Munro instructed a second group of students who assumed identities of families who suffered from food insecurity. The participants in each group had to make difficult food decisions based on the roles they were assigned. For example, students had to decide if cost or nutrition was the most important factor, especially within impoverished families. Many chose cost because as some of the participants noted, even though cheap food is not always nutritious, at least it “fills the belly.”

The participants in this simulation realized that cost wasn't the only obstacle; managing time to actually go grocery shopping was also difficult. Assuming the role of parents working fulltime or parents juggling two jobs, students had to determine how they were going to balance work, taking care of children, and household chores, along with grocery shopping. This was a challenge for many students, especially those in the food desert group. Not only did they have minimal access to food sources, those resources were only open for certain amounts of time.

The concepts the students learned throughout the simulation were put into real practice when it was time for lunch. Although a full meal was provided for the students, the participants could not eat their entire meals at once. Some students had to spread out their lunch over the course of the simulation, and others had to wait until the simulation was completely over to begin eating. This allowed students to get a feel for what it is like to be in the position of families who are hungry.

The food insecurity simulation and the service projects that occurred on this day required the collective effort of many Illinois Wesleyan students, faculty and staff, and this was yet another goal of the service day. “The point of Interfaith is to have cooperation between many different groups of people,” said Kerr-Carpenter. “By having a campus-wide service day, many students, regardless of their backgrounds, were able to come together and make a difference in the Bloomington-Normal community.”

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Micah Smith '20 and other students construct a hoop house in the Peace Garden. (Photo by Cadyn Williamson '18)