

IWU & the Westside: Revitalization in Action

Karen Schmidt & Deborah Halperin

1. I am Deborah Halperin and I run the Action Research Center (or ARC) here at IWU. This is Karen Schmidt, the University Librarian and a member of city council. We are here with Kirsten Slaughter and Julie Lewis, to showcase the collaborative engagement work we do to help revitalize the Westside.
2. At ARC, our motto is Get Stuff Done. We're the Action Research Center and not the Google It and Think About It Research Center. ARC customizes Westside projects that are challenging and meaningful and move ideas forward. This is a unique part of a Wesleyan education where you get to use the community as your classroom.
3. Wesleyan and the Westside is a reciprocal relationship. The Westside benefits from the resources and talents of Wesleyan and Wesleyan has limitless opportunities for research, project-based learning, and service. We are lucky to have each other.
4. Our main partner is the West Bloomington Revitalization Project or the WBRP. This is a small grass roots non-profit that has been around for ten years and Karen and I are both active board members who have been involved from the beginning. The WBRP has six focus areas but I am just going to talk about housing today and some of our great work in this area.
5. For four years now, students can spend their fall break completing Westside service projects. Paint stuff, build stuff, clean stuff...This kind of volunteer work is popular and ARC uses these activities to introduce students to our Westside partnership.
6. A front porch can do a lot for a community so every summer we build a few. That is Greg Shaw on the left, a Poli Sci professor showing off his handiwork. It is not just students being engaged. It's faculty and staff, too. Every year Wesleyan gives over 10,000 hours to the Westside which is about 25% of our total community engagement.
7. Housing work needs tools. Matt LaLonde, a 2014 accounting major, started the WBRP Tool Library. It is the first Tool Library in the state. Membership is free and members are allowed to check out tools just like checking out a book from a regular library. There are over 700 members of the library and over 3000 tool loans have been made.
8. We offer a 300-level Action Research seminar focused on the Westside where students do individual and group projects. We have class on the Westside, we eat donuts from a Westside bakery, and the Westside strategic plan is our textbook. This amazing housing database was an individual seminar project by Austin Aldag.
9. We had an ARC summer intern who studied foreclosures alongside economics professor Diego Mendez. This heat density map shows foreclosures concentrated right there on the Westside. We should have Westside action research internships in every single department because any major can do Westside projects and they should.
10. We offer a grant writing class where we partner with real non-profits and write real grants for real programs because fake money is useless. Students worked with a small team of Westside partners and secured a housing grant worth \$1.5 million and now we build and repair homes, and even flip homes in the community.

11. A student researched the intersection of housing and community policing. We are working with the police department to offer a Westside home rent free to a police officer. This could have a big impact on crime and the perception of crime in the area (which is another study done by an ARC student).
12. There is power in focusing your efforts on a target area. The house that students painted over fall break in 2012 is the same house we bought with grant money in 2014 and it's the same house we hope to give to a police officer in 2017. When your projects begin to layer like this, it really makes an impact.
13. Because it's not just about housing. It's about a family's home on a great block in a neighborhood that is working hard toward revitalization with partners like Illinois Wesleyan. We do the same depth and breadth of work across all of the WBRP focus areas – and we have so much more to do.
14. I am Karen Schmidt and this could be my purse! I am fortunate to be the University Librarian here at IWU. I am also ward 6 alderman for the City of Bloomington. One of the things I love best about my work at IWU is the opportunity to blend support for student research with my involvement in city government and community outreach.
15. WBRP is a test kitchen –and our kitchen is always open to the skills of ARC students, who are always cooking up something new. When you walk into our office, pretty much everything you see is a project that has been touched in some way by ARC. ARC students Get Stuff Done, Pass It On, and Pay It Forward.
16. I have always thought about my work as an alderman the same way I think about my work as a librarian: both are about good service and more importantly, making sure people have the right information and enough of it to make informed decisions. People tend to think of libraries and librarians as relatively passive – peaceful. The libraries and librarians I know and love are a force for inquiry & exploration of ideas and a voice for social good. Our students understand this and want this.
17. Students see librarians in the classroom and in our offices or out and about in the library, and they tend to think of us as a go-to for finding that perfect peer-reviewed article that will help them get the A on the paper. We do that. We also connect students to non-traditional resources for their service learning projects. For example, this resource guide has information that city planners use in their daily work.
18. The Book Bike has a very simple concept: Free books, no strings attached, as many as a person will read. When families don't have a lot of disposable income, books can be a luxury. IWU students often provide pedal power, sort books, and hold book drives.
19. Little Free Library are like a stationary Book Bike. These are tailor-made for an ARC project. Professor Greg Shaw has guided students in building and installing these in west Bloomington. This summer ARC interns will help me install one at our local bus transfer station.
20. The downtown farmer's market hosted a powerful ARC project. An ARC student identified west Bloomington as a food desert. He established a token system at the farmer's market that allows people to use food stamp cards, debit cards, and the like. Now anyone can buy fresh local produce without anyone being aware of who might be using a LINK card. This was the first of its kind in downstate Illinois.

21. What happens after the farmers market is another ARC miracle. Students glean the unsold produce and give it away in west Bloomington. So far, over 10,000 pounds of fresh produce has been given away on a budget of \$00.00. In addition to getting good food, people come together to talk and share recipes.
22. Our community garden was one of our first wins as an organization. This was a key project that helped WBRP establish its identity. An ARC student researched how to launch, organize and run a community garden. ARC students organize our annual Harvest Day event and support other community gardens in west Bloomington.
23. The west side has a strong history. We know that understanding our history raises our respect for neighborhoods. This semester I am working with a history student on developing genealogies of a few buildings. This summer we will work with the Museum of History to pull the west side story together in a different way.
24. Tiny homes are more than a program on HGTV. Bloomington has its share of homeless people. An ARC student worked on a tiny home program. I assisted with zoning code interpretations that currently make it difficult to place these tiny homes. Theatre professor Curtis Trout worked on building this prototype.
25. WBRP strategic plan calls for economic development. TIF is one important tool. ARC students instrumental in working through the issues of the TIF (Tax Increment Financing) district. Their research culminated in a presentation to the Bloomington City Council that lays the foundation for future considerations for economic development.
26. The Walk-In-Bike-Out event is another game changer from the WBRP. This is an annual event where people can get refurbished bikes, no questions asked. We generally gives away about 200 bikes in less than an hour. Students assist with planning, bike tune-ups, and research into other projects like a west side bike co-op.
27. The WBRP Annual Taste of the West is another signature event. This event allows local aspiring chefs to show their cooking skills to the community. This is our annual meeting and a chance to showcase the work we are doing with our ARC students at the WBRP. Students help us with marketing the event, staffing tables and media coverage.
28. Over to two ARC students – Kirsten and Julie - to talk about their projects and work with ARC.