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2022

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Building Community during COVID-19 and Beyond: How a Community Garden Strengthened an Honors Community

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Abstract: Amid social distancing restrictions, community gardening becomes a focal point of one honors program. While providing fresh produce to the campus food pantry, this student-run initiative generates a new setting for experiential and service learning.

Keywords: learning communities; agricultural education; COVID-19 pandemic—teaching and learning; Midwestern State University (TX)—Redwine Honors Program

Citation: *Honors in Practice*, 2022, Vol. 18: 161–63

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, honors programs across the U.S. struggled to maintain community as higher education moved largely to a virtual setting. Although this shift produced numerous innovations in creative programming, real social interaction greatly diminished. For young adults, social interaction is especially crucial to intellectual and social development, and with community as a key pillar of honors education, compensating for this loss quickly became one of the greatest challenges of the pandemic. As a regional university in Texas struggled to find creative ways to maintain its community, an unexpected development occurred. For their senior project, two nursing students, struck by the concept of food deserts, proposed the creation of a community garden that would provide fresh produce for the campus food pantry. By contributing a campus-wide service component, this initiative expanded on the work of Lund and Orth (2010)

and Wallace (2016), described previously in *Honors in Practice*, who found gardening projects to be powerful examples of experiential learning about environmental ethics and community.

To accomplish their goals, the two students obtained seed donations from local nurseries and then sought approval from the university for a suitable space. During these conversations, a partnership developed between a landscaping foreman with a love of sustainable agriculture, whose name is Jason, and the honors students. Together they selected a small space, hidden behind the wellness center, with room to plant four rows of crops. Over Halloween weekend 2020, the garden was established.

What started as a small senior honors project quickly blossomed into the focal point of the program as the pandemic progressed. As the director worried about sustaining the project and recruiting student volunteers, a surprising trend developed: more students wanted to participate than social distance requirements would allow. Weeding, raking, planting, and harvesting all became more popular than virtual lectures or trivia, and, most importantly, these activities preserved social interaction. In groups of five we would work masked and distanced but able to interact, and this interaction was vibrant. Discussions over weeding spanned wide topics from typical college social issues and campus news but slowly transformed into a learning experience. Under the guidance of Jason, our landscaping guide, an outdoor classroom developed in which students learned how to garden without pesticides, why bugs were a sign of a healthy ecosystem, how to identify weeds, and how to structure gardens for the extreme temperatures in Texas. As these lessons progressed, students began to discuss how gardening differed from dry Texas to their hometowns in such faraway places as Barbados, the Bahamas, Italy, Germany, Kansas, and California. Conversation about precipitation, soil acidity, or seasonal crop selection quickly became both agricultural and cultural lessons for all involved.

As the garden quickly developed a critical mass, Texas experienced a historic blizzard that devastated agriculture across the state, killing large amounts of decorative vegetation on campus. This hardship, however, ultimately provided a silver lining as the community garden survived and began producing harvests in early spring. This success led Jason to suggest we expand the garden into an area where the decorative vegetation had been killed, quadrupling the size of the garden and in turn providing space for more students to participate. The garden thrived, producing harvests on a biweekly basis ranging from beets to cantaloupe to green peppers, providing the only fresh produce

offered by our campus food pantry. Their contributions to this broader campus effort became a source of pride among honors students on our campus.

Today the garden is over a year old, and innovations continue. We have planned a series of lectures on topics such as nutrition, cooking, and the history of agriculture in the area. Students are planning an “adopt a garden” initiative in which we create a number of smaller gardens throughout the campus, to be adopted by campus entities, as a way to bolster sustainability on campus. This experience has provided a focal point and source of pride for our students at a time of few positives. Additionally, it has provided a powerful experiential learning opportunity in which the honors students not only can apply classroom lessons but can provide tangible benefits to their peers. This ability to serve their campus community while engaging in much needed social interaction has ultimately strengthened our community and provided an excellent example of what works in honors.

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