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Entry details

Entry Name: NourishCycle: Turning Campus Waste into Growth

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Essay:

Harding University SGA Garden Committee & Bison Hospitality Partnership

NourishCycle: Turning Campus Waste into Growth

In 2025, Harding University's Student Government Association embarked on an initiative that reshaped the relationship between students, food systems, and sustainability across campus. Through the establishment of the SGA Garden Committee and a deepened partnership with Bison Hospitality—the university's dining program—Harding expanded its campus garden into a robust, interactive, and educational ecosystem. What began as a collection of small planting beds developed into an integrative model of sustainable procurement, environmental stewardship, collaborative learning, waste reduction, community engagement, and student leadership. This initiative reintroduced the campus community to the power of local food systems while demonstrating how student-driven sustainability programs can influence dining operations, cultivation practices, and community relationships.

The project's earliest goal was to meaningfully expand the role of campus-grown produce in serving not only the dining hall, but also the broader campus community. As the garden grew, it began regularly supplying fresh fruits and vegetables to nearby residence halls, student-led food initiatives, and members of the surrounding community. These deliveries forged stronger connections between students and the food they consumed daily. Rather than

contributing produce solely to institutional dining operations, the garden's harvests became shared resources that encouraged students to cook, collaborate, and learn from one another. This model helped decentralize campus food sources and created an inclusive environment where fresh, local produce was accessible to all—regardless of meal plan or living arrangement.

A defining characteristic of the initiative was its direct impact on culinary quality. The garden's herb beds were especially productive, offering fragrant basil, mint, parsley, rosemary, thyme, oregano, and more. These herbs were harvested regularly and delivered to Bison Hospitality's catering department, where chefs incorporated them into sauces, garnishes, dressings, and entrées featured at institutional gatherings. Fresh herbs elevated both the flavor and the presentation of catered meals and public events, showcasing the culinary potential of campus-grown ingredients. This partnership between cultivation and cuisine demonstrated how collaborative efforts can reduce reliance on externally sourced herbs—often packaged in plastic and shipped long distances—while enriching the quality of campus dining.

Environmental responsibility served as the guiding principle behind every aspect of the garden's expansion. Students adopted regenerative gardening practices intended to enrich soil health, conserve resources, and create ecological benefits that would last for years to come. These practices included compost-amended soil building, the incorporation of pollinator-friendly flowers and shrubs, and careful water stewardship through manual rather than mechanized irrigation systems. One of the most impactful partnerships supporting the environmental aspect of the program was with Harding University's Physical Resources Department, whose staff played a critical role in seasonal soil rotation. Soil rotation—a practice that prevents nutrient depletion and reduces the prevalence of pests—allowed the garden to maintain productive beds year after year. Physical Resources staff instructed students on proper soil-turning techniques, integrated organic matter to improve soil structure, and ensured that beds were adequately prepared at the start of each planting season. Their expertise helped the garden maintain long-term viability and gave students valuable insights into sustainable land management.

Central to the program's environmental mission was the development of a comprehensive composting system that drastically reduced waste. At the start of the academic year, the Garden Committee created a Google Doc volunteer sign-up form where students could register to collect compostable food scraps every Monday. This simple yet effective system allowed students from all majors and interests to participate without barriers, ensuring consistent weekly involvement. Volunteers retrieved compostable materials—such as vegetable scraps, fruit peels, eggshells, and coffee filters—from the dining hall. These scraps were then transported to the garden's composting area, where students learned to layer carbon-rich brown materials with nitrogen-rich green materials to create nutrient-dense compost. Over the 2025 academic year, the program diverted an impressive 320 gallons of compostable material away from landfills.

A notable highlight of the composting system was its partnership with the campus Starbucks, which contributed weekly donations of used coffee grounds. Coffee grounds, rich in nitrogen, served as an essential ingredient in balancing the carbon-to-nitrogen ratio required for healthy compost. Students integrated these grounds into the compost piles, accelerating decomposition and increasing the nutritional value of the resulting soil amendment. This collaboration not only reduced waste from a high-traffic campus retailer but also created a richer, eco-friendly soil supplement that supported vibrant plant growth. The system exemplified a closed-loop model in which waste generated on campus directly supported campus food production.

Beyond campus operations, the garden initiative fostered meaningful relationships with the local community. Among the most valuable partners was the White County Iris Society, whose members generously volunteered their time to assist with planting, maintenance, and education. Their expertise in horticulture was instrumental in helping students introduce a wider variety of flowering plants that supported pollinators and contributed to soil health. In addition to working alongside university students, the Iris Society extended its educational reach to Harding Academy, offering classes that taught younger learners the fundamentals of gardening, plant identification, soil science, and environmental stewardship. This intergenerational partnership strengthened the garden's impact and helped cultivate an appreciation for sustainable gardening practices among local youth.

Innovation was embedded throughout the structure of the program. Unlike many university gardens that rely entirely on academic departments or facilities teams, Harding placed leadership directly in the hands of its Student

Government Association. This student-led model provided the initiative with strong visibility, a sense of ownership among the student body, and a sustainable leadership structure that could evolve with each incoming class. The involvement of SGA also emphasized that sustainability was not just a campus project but a student priority, integrated into governance and student advocacy. Bison Hospitality enhanced this innovative structure by collaborating with student leaders on decisions related to planting schedules, ingredient needs, and harvest usage. This alignment between dining operations and student leadership fostered a cohesive, communicative, and forward-thinking approach to sustainable food systems.

Student engagement acted as the driving force behind the garden's growth. The Garden Committee created opportunities for students to participate in garden maintenance regardless of their experience level. Volunteers tended to irrigation, weeded beds, built trellises, spread compost, harvested produce, and assisted in distributing food to residence halls and student groups. These activities not only supported garden operations but also helped students develop tangible skills—ranging from agricultural literacy to teamwork, leadership, and physical stewardship of the earth. Work sessions often brought together students from different academic programs, campus organizations, and cultural backgrounds, creating shared experiences that strengthened campus unity.

The educational impact of the initiative extended even further. The Garden Committee regularly communicated with the campus community through posters, campus-wide announcements, and social media accounts dedicated to sustainability updates. These communication channels informed students about harvest events, volunteer opportunities, composting guidelines, and sustainability tips, making sustainability a visible and accessible part of daily life. In the dining hall, signs indicated when herbs or produce had been sourced from the campus garden, helping students understand how their volunteerism or compost contributions were directly influencing their meals. These visible markers served an important educational purpose: they connected daily behaviors—such as composting food scraps or volunteering for an hour—to tangible environmental outcomes.

Financial sustainability was a central consideration in the program's design. The initiative operated with minimal expenses, relying on student volunteers, donated materials, and guidance from the Physical Resources Department. Only modest investments were required for seeds, tools, and soil amendments. The program's low overhead ensured that it remained financially accessible while delivering high community value. The partnership with Bison Hospitality further strengthened financial sustainability, as campus-grown herbs reduced procurement costs over time and decreased reliance on externally sourced ingredients.

The garden program's thoughtful structure also incorporated several layers of risk mitigation. Staggered planting, multi-season crop planning, and diversified plant varieties ensured that the garden remained productive despite fluctuations in weather or unexpected volunteer shortages. Mulching strategies reduced water usage during dry periods, while backup arrangements with local farmers ensured that dining operations remained stable even if certain crops underperformed. These measures helped stabilize the program and gave students firsthand experience with agricultural risk management.

One of the greatest strengths of the initiative is its adaptability and replicability. The program's structure—anchored by student leadership, supported by campus dining, enriched by facilities expertise, and enhanced through community partnerships—can be replicated at institutions of varying sizes and resources. Most universities possess green space, gardening potential, dining operations, and student governance systems; therefore, Harding's model serves as a practical template for institutions seeking to create or expand sustainable agriculture initiatives.

Ultimately, the partnership between the Harding SGA Garden Committee, Bison Hospitality, the Physical Resources Department, and the White County Iris Society demonstrates the extraordinary outcomes that emerge when diverse contributors collaborate toward environmental responsibility. The initiative is forward-looking, inclusive, financially accessible, and deeply educational. By supplying fresh produce to the community, elevating campus catering with aromatic herbs, reducing food waste through composting, engaging students in meaningful hands-on work, and creating partnerships that cross generational and institutional boundaries, Harding University has built a sustainability model that enriches the present and inspires a more sustainable future.

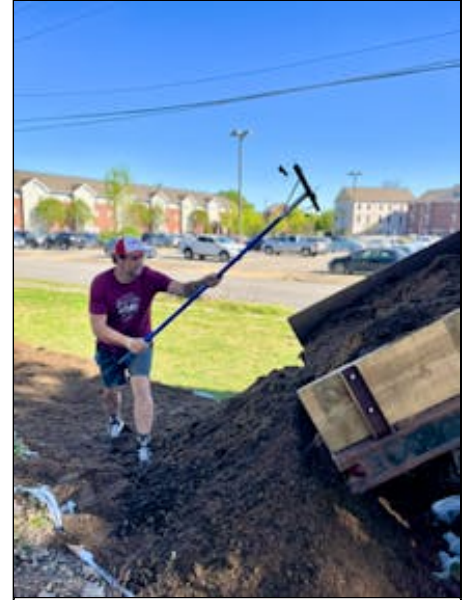
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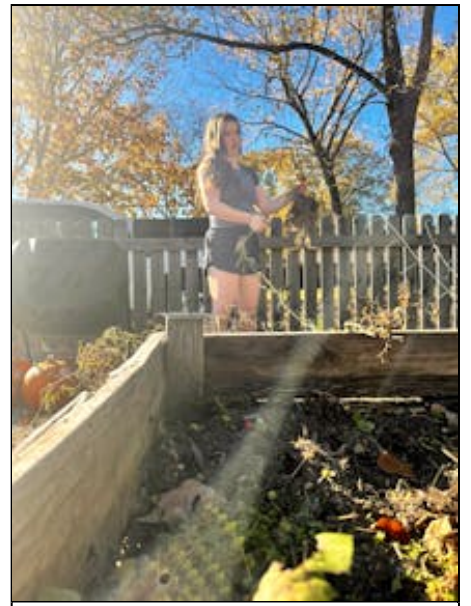
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