

PROJECT HELPS ARBORETUM PLAN FUTURE

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Ten years after [Taltree Arboretum and Gardens](#) was founded to maintain part of Northwest Indiana's natural habitat, a survey recently conducted by five Valparaiso University students will help guide its future. The project began last year when Taltree approached [Valparaiso's Community Research and Service Center](#) for assistance in surveying its membership to gauge their attitudes about the benefits they receive, their reasons for visiting the arboretum, favorite attractions and other issues. Valparaiso's recently-submitted final report includes information about respondents' overall opinions on those issues, as well as differences among members of different ages, family types and locations. James Hitz, Taltree's executive director, said the survey was an important step in updating the arboretum's six-year-old membership program and making sure its resources are being used wisely. "We wanted to ensure that we're providing our visitors with the programs and services that they're most interested in, as well as find out those things we should consider doing," Hitz said. "As a not-for-profit organization, we want to avoid being wasteful with our resources." Hitz said the most valuable result of the survey was determining that Taltree's priorities – including providing a relaxing environment where people can enjoy nature, its music concerts and gardens – reflect those of its members. Now that Taltree's Board of Directors has the results, Hitz said its marketing committee can use that information to improve the arboretum and develop future programs. "We have lots of ideas for projects and programs at Taltree, but these survey results will keep us focused on the core things that we need to focus on to fulfill our mission and serve our members," he said. Valparaiso undergraduates working in the CRSC wrote an initial draft of the questionnaire, worked with Taltree's marketing committee in revising the survey, created the database of the more than 300 survey responses, analyzed the results and wrote a final report with Dr. [James Old](#), associate director of the CRSC and an adjunct assistant professor of political science. The final report was submitted to Taltree in early July. Dr. Old, who supervised the students working on the Taltree survey, said these types of research projects are valuable learning experiences for students. "Our students enjoy working on a research project and creating a report that they know someone is actually going to use, something that people in the real world are going to read and make decisions based on," Dr. Old said. "It's nearly impossible to replicate that kind of experience in a traditional classroom situation. "Students also learn that there are all kinds of organizations out there who value what they can do," Dr. Old said. "Projects like this help them recognize how the skills they are learning in their classes can open up a lot of opportunities for them, in terms of both finding employment and contributing to their communities." Hitz noted that Taltree has maintained a strong relationship with the University since its founding, including having professors serve on the arboretum's board and creating internships for undergraduate students. "Whenever we've had an opportunity to work with Valpo students and faculty it's been a wonderful experience for us and really helped us in achieving our mission," Hitz said. About the Community Research and Service Center [Valparaiso University's Community Research and Service Center](#) provides research assistance and other services to government and not-for-profit organizations in Northwest Indiana. Research is conducted by undergraduate students under the supervision of faculty to gain practical

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experience in applied research and familiarity with government, non-profit and other organizations. The CRSC has been cited by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change as a model for how universities can organize and establish partnerships to impact the surrounding community, and it has done work for the city of Valparaiso, Hoosier Environmental Council, Portage Parks and Recreation Department, Hilltop Neighborhood House, Porter County Juvenile Detention Center, Family and Youth Services Bureau of Porter County and numerous other organizations.

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