

RITA in Action

Indiana Watershed Leadership Academy

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RITA Mentor Technician 3

Indiana Watershed Leadership Academy (IWLA) is a program of Purdue Extension, started in 2006 to strengthen local capacity for successful watershed management. The Academy is led by Jane Frankenberger, Project Director, and Sara Peel, Academy Coordinator. RITA Mentors Emma Bodnarick, Jamie Davenport, Sydney Hassfurth, and Camille Sczerbowicz participated in the 21st IWLA Program this year. Many SWCD staff in my region have graduated from IWLA. From them, I have heard how IWLA has furthered their skills and provided them with a knowledgeable network of watershed professionals to tap into.



The assignments have been helpful to have guided tasks that participants can tailor to their watershed. As a RITA tech working with many districts, I tried to tailor assignments to different watersheds and watershed issues throughout my region. Electives on topics were expansive and allowed participants to tailor their assignments to their current positions. I chose electives focused on growing my knowledge in areas I lacked, Understanding Drainage Policy and Regulated Drains, Gathering Information About Your Watershed Using Social Indicators, and The Clean Water Act: Understanding Permits.

The final task of the Academy is to complete a group project with 1-2 other IWLA participants. I worked alongside Maiya Rizzo, Watershed Project Manager at Allen County Soil and Water, to create Waterdrop in a Watershed, a choose-your-own adventure booklet geared towards Indiana middle school students. The booklet allows readers to embark on the journey of a waterdrop, starting in either a forest, farm field, or mall parking lot. Allen County SWCD received a 205(j) grant from IDEM to re-write the 2009 St. Mary's River Watershed Management Plan, and part of the new plan is education and outreach. Middle school students are often missed in natural resource education, but there are many state science standards for grades 6-8 that soil and water districts can help teachers demonstrate. To see past projects, head to the Academy website <https://engineering.purdue.edu/watersheds/academy.html>

The Academy has been amazing to learn about all the innovative projects and initiatives participants are involved in. The program brings together so many passionate people, from all across the state and sectors of public, private, and non-profit work. This experience has been energizing as an early career professional in conservation. I encourage anyone who hasn't been through IWLA to consider attending and reach out to those who have participated in IWLA near you. There are scholarships available to cover some, or all, of the cost to attend, from IWLA, SARE Professional Development Program, and Indiana Lakes Management Society.