Each year, second year presidential scholars are tasked with planning and implementing an initiative here at the University of Northern Iowa. In fall 2012, the UNI Presidential Scholars noticed that they did not know where their food in the dining center originated from and set out to change that.

The Panther Plot, a student run garden on UNI’s campus, is currently finishing its third season of growth. For the past three summers, Eric O’Brien, Sustainability Coordinator at UNI, and many volunteers have planted, grown and harvested produce from the Panther Plot. Produce from the Panther Plot has been used for a variety of purposes, these include:

- Sold to UNI dining services
- Donated to the Northeast Iowa Food Bank
- Sold on campus at the Panther Plot Produce Stand
- Given to Panther Plot volunteers

At its inception, the UNI Presidential Scholars wanted the garden to allow for local food growth while also providing students the opportunity to gain experience working in horticulture and food sciences. The mission statement established by the scholars reads, “The Panther Plot is a collaborative effort between students and the university community. Through the establishment of an on-campus garden, we will assist students in learning practical gardening skills and applying educational concepts concerning food systems.”

“The original idea was to give students an opportunity to be part of an on-campus organic garden,” stated O’Brien, “The mission hasn’t changed much, but it has certainly evolved since then.”

As the physical garden was established on campus during its first two growing seasons, a plan was designed, constructed and implemented in spring 2015 to improve the aesthetic and visual interest of the Panther Plot. That plan outlined the need for increased student awareness and interest in the Panther Plot by addressing a variety of wants and needs for the space. Members of the Green Project UNI – The Panther Plot, a student organization that maintains the garden, have played a crucial role in creating the five-year plan for the garden.

“We have had students that are members of Green Project, many of which have majors within STEM fields, applying skills that they have learned in the classroom as members of the club,” explained O’Brien. As the organization created its five-year plan, one of the interior design students in the organization was given the opportunity to use the skills she had learned in her interior design classes to create an architectural landscape plan for the Panther Plot; utilizing CAD and Google Sketchup based drawings to create the concept.

One of the students who has played a big role in the development of the Panther Plot is Kelsey Ewald, a senior health promotion: global health and health disparities major. With little knowledge of gardening but a passion for sustain-
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ability, she got involved with the Green Project UNI – The Panther Plot and quickly learned how to manage the garden, becoming the student manager for the garden during the summer 2014 growing season.

“I served as Vice President of Green Project UNI – The Panther Plot during my junior year and loved the experience,” she said. “Last year, I was the manager of the garden and got it off the ground. We made connections with different areas of the community to send food to the Northeast Iowa Food Bank, dining centers and some of the restaurants on College Hill. We also saw an increase in the usage of the space as more faculty members were visiting the garden.”

“Faculty members teaching biology, earth science, geography, environmental science and technology classes have regularly held class time in the outdoor learning area of the garden.” Stated O’Brien. This type of exposure is what the presidential scholars had hoped for three years ago; with students gaining experience in horticulture and the food sciences while learning about sustainability issues that affect our community.

While the Panther Plot is still relatively new to campus, it is making big impacts in the way the university and area businesses obtain their produce. As the garden continues to grow, both O’Brien and Ewald are excited for the future of the garden and the impact it is having on our community; especially the experience it is, and will continue to provide to UNI students using the space.