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## Western Herbalism: What Drives Individuals Within Rhode Island to Study This Ancient Healing Modality?

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# Western herbalism: What drives individuals within Rhode Island to study this ancient healing modality?

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## Problem of Practice

As Mary Blue (2015) shares, traditional knowledge regarding herbalism has been forgotten and appropriated through years of imperialization. To continue spreading awareness of this healing modality to communities who need it, it is important to first understand the “why” that motivates already-existing students. This “why” may be a desire to fill the gaps in literature pertaining to the history and development of Western herbalism, or perhaps the “why” is a desire to have a deeper understanding of the role herbs play in the prevention and treatment of disease. Understanding the motivations of herbal practitioners and learners may help inform awareness content to further spread this healing modality.

**Research Question:** How can I effectively identify what drives people to study Western herbalism?

## Review of Literature

**History of Western Herbalism:** Development of Western herbalism largely began with the exploitation of traditional healing practices from enslaved Africans and Indigenous peoples during colonization (Morgan, 2020). This suppression of traditional medicine led to gaps in literature pertaining to the history and development of Western herbalism (Asongwe, 2021), making it important that practitioners respect and honor the roots of these ancient healing modalities (Blue, 2015).

**Indigenous Agricultural Practices:** Indigenous agricultural practices promote biodiversity and focus on complementary relationships between plants (Sharma et al., 2020). Taking these complementary relationships into account, Western herbalism should be explored using the framework of Complex Systems Science (CSS) as opposed to the reductionist approach used with pharmaceutical research (Neimeyer et al., 2013).

**Medicinal Properties of Herbs:** Although using a more reductionist approach, existing clinical studies show herbs to be beneficial for those with cerebral palsy (Clemente et al., 2021), Type II Diabetes Mellitus (Ruiz-Noa et al., 2021), self-reported anxiety and depression (Casteleijn et al., 2019), and obesity management (Aumeeruddy & Mahomoodally, 2021).

**Barriers to Herbal Accessibility:** Regulations in the United States act as barriers to herbs and herbal education (Brendler et al., 2021), including for medicinal use related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Xiong et al., 2021). Different environments also hinder growth and affect metabolic makeup of medicinal plants, acting as a barrier for physical accessibility (Zhang et al., 2021).



## Action Plan

**Week 1:** Reach out to educators and students and gain permission for interviews.

**Week 2:** Conduct interviews and collect observational research.

**Week 3:** Analyze interviews and observational research for presented themes; pull quotes to use as supporting evidence.

**Week 4:** Organize data into charts and graphs, draw conclusions based on findings, and report on future research needs.

**Week 5:** Create poster presentation that accurately depicts findings and conclusions.

**Week 6:** Present poster presentation.

### Standards of judgement:

Did I gather information which could prove useful in determining factors that drive people to study Western herbalism? Does this information provide potential for future action to increase awareness of, participation in, and education of Western herbalism?

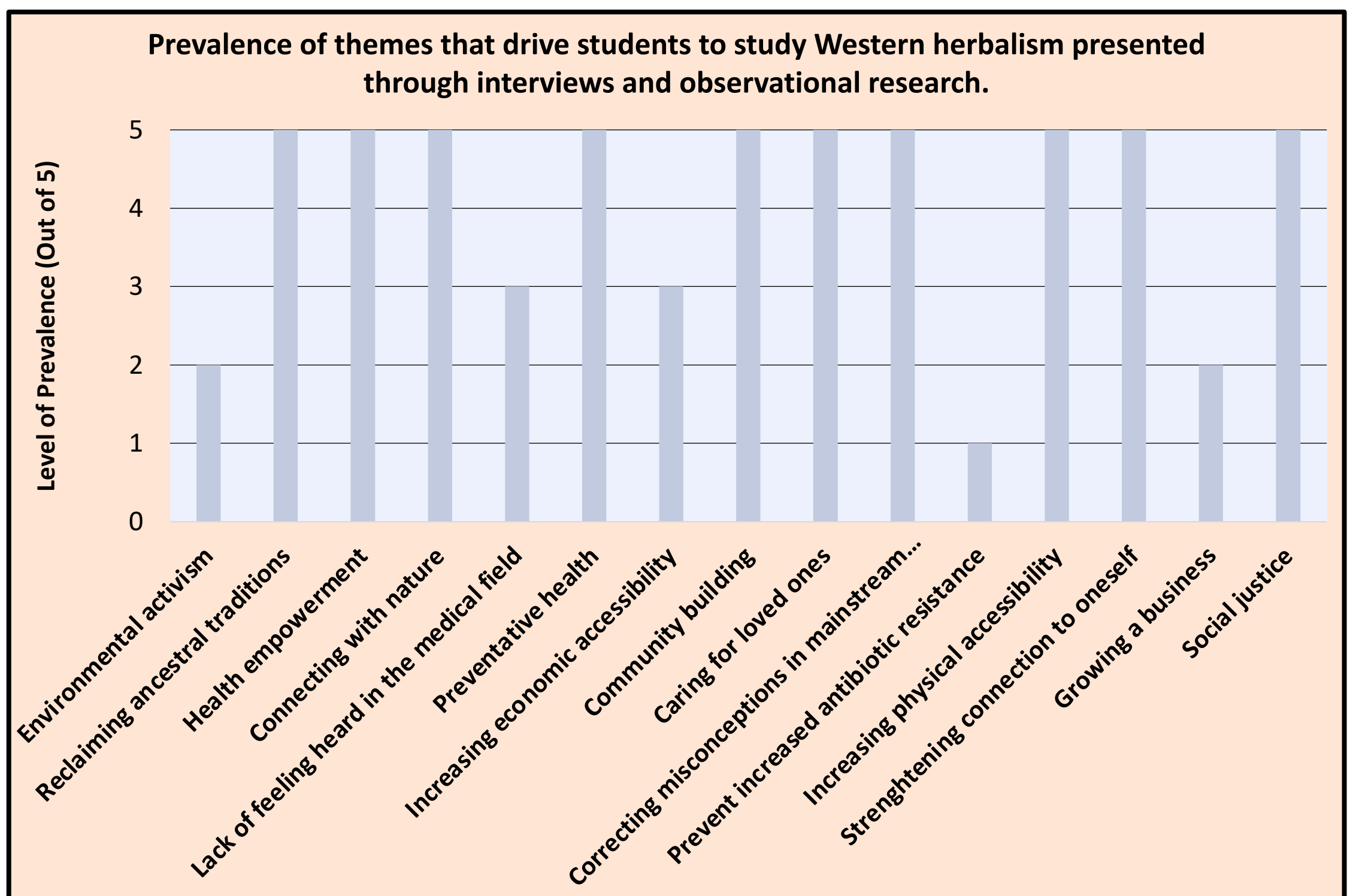
## Data Collection and Analysis

**Figure 1:** Identifying which motivators for studying Western herbalism were presented through interviews and observational research. Y = Yes, the theme was presented; N = No, the theme was not presented.

	Method of Data Collection				
	Student Interview - Priscilla	Student Interview - Kristen	Educator Interview - Tammy	Educator Interview - Mary	Observational Research
Theme 1: Environmental activism	N	N	N	Y	Y
Theme 2: Reclaiming ancestral traditions	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Theme 3: Health empowerment	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Theme 4: Connecting with nature	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Theme 5: Lack of feeling heard in the medical field	N	Y	N	Y	Y
Theme 6: Preventative health	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Theme 7: Increasing economic accessibility	Y	N	N	Y	Y
Theme 8: Community building	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Theme 9: Caring for loved ones	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Theme 10: Correcting misconceptions in mainstream media	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Theme 11: Prevention of increased antibiotic resistance	N	N	N	Y	N
Theme 12: Increasing physical accessibility	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Theme 13: Strengthening connection to oneself	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Theme 14: Growing a business	Y	N	N	Y	N
Theme 15: Social justice	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

A triangulation method was used for data collection. The three data points used were interviews of herbal educators, interviews of students, and observational research. Two herbal educators and two herbal students were interviewed who teach and study, respectively, through Pharmacy Herbs Community Education Center in Providence, RI. Observational research was collected during in-person class time at the education center. Themes were created based on interview findings and were informed by prior knowledge from observational research and literature review findings. Figure 1 shows themes presented during each data collection point, and Figure 2 shows the prevalence of each theme across all five data collection points.

**Figure 2:** Prevalence of themes that drive students to study Western herbalism presented through interviews and observational research.



## Conclusions

Ten themes presented from all five data points include:

- Reclaiming ancestral traditions
- Health empowerment
- Connecting with nature
- Preventative health
- Community building
- Caring for loved ones
- Correcting misconceptions in mainstream media
- Increasing physical accessibility of herbs and herbal education
- Strengthening connection to oneself
- Social justice

This study was limited to herbal educators and students within Rhode Island and was completed within one semester, leaving minimal time to conduct interviews and analyze data, resulting in a small sample size.



## Plans for Future Action

- Now that the motives for studying Western herbalism have been successfully identified within a small group of herbal educators and students, tailored content to raise awareness can be created to target those specific drivers of interest. These varying drivers of interest indicate a likelihood that most people would be interested in learning more about this practice for their own health, the health of their communities, and/or the health of the land.
- As inspired by Mary Blue’s mention of herbalism being forced into an evidence-based medicine paradigm by the medical system, continued research should explore Western herbalism as interpreted by CSS to ensure special consideration is given to the profoundness of natural phenomena, processes, and designs.
- There is great potential for exploration in the field of Western herbalism, and the findings in this study provide a solid beginning for that exploration.