Since purchasing the former Resurrection Retreat Center in 2010, Loyola University has transformed the building and grounds into a haven for learning and team building and a model for sustainable agriculture.

The 98-acre Loyola University Retreat & Ecology Campus serves as a base of operations for a host of university summer courses — this year, courses such as fieldwork in ethnobotany and ethnoecology, wetland ecology and archaeology field school will be offered — as well as a retreat center for various groups and organizations. Many of the retreat traditions are carried over from the center’s previous owner.

Loyola has significantly upgraded the facility, modernizing many of the dorm rooms where students stay and also installing state-of-the-art classrooms in areas that were once storage.

“[Students] can study ecology in the classroom, then go right out and do it,” said Alex Tuchman, farm operations assistant. Tuchman actually is the assistant to no one, since the farm director left for the Peace Corp a year ago and Tuchman, then a second-year intern, was hired on full time for the job.

Tuchman is committed to making the campus a source of local produce. Since Loyola took over, Tuchman and his volunteers have turned a portion of the front lawn into the farm.
“Basically, we’re trying to grow any vegetable that people eat,” he said. Currently, the farm grows many varieties of lettuce, mustard, potatoes, flowers, tomatoes, eggplants, cucumbers and wheat. Recently planted are apple, peach, plum and pear trees and an assortment of berry bushes. The campus also constructed a hoop house — a type of plastic-covered green house so crops can be grown in the winter — and several beehives.

In the spirit of renewal, workers took an old hay wagon and turned it into a mobile chicken coop, outfitting the front with an old church door with the bottom glass pane removed for the chickens to come and go as they please. The mobile coop can be moved around the fields so the chickens fertilize different sections.

Tuchman eventually would like to get to the point where 100 percent of the food served in the retreat’s cafeteria comes from the property, but they aren’t there quite yet.

“We want to be self-sustaining and self-sufficient,” he said. “The farm is becoming pretty integrated with the food service.”

While one group of visitors to campus is students who can take advantage of opportunities like the farm and the restoration of the property’s natural wetland, another group is comprised of organizations looking to have fun. Most of the visitors to the campus during the school year actually are not from Loyola.

“[We] get sports teams and groups that are interested in team building,” said Tuchman. For this, Loyola has constructed a cornucopia of summer camp and playground-like activities.

A zipline stretches several hundred yards and takes a rider’s breath away when they’re taken from 35 mph to a full stop thanks to hydraulics at the end of the ride.

Resurfaced tennis and basketball courts are available for athletics, and a climbing wall tests any climber’s skills.

Deeper into the woods is a ropes course, a series of wooden towers connected by wires and platforms designed to develop team building. Any group can utilize the course, and Loyola provides trained instructors.

Tuchman said the average size of a retreat group is about 50 people. He said all the work the university has done to the facility is paying off.

“I think people have been having really awesome experiences when they’ve been coming here,” he said. Weekends at the retreat are booked until November.

And Tuchman, who lives on campus and sees daily progress, is excited about the future. As his farm expands, he said the university will host more events open to the public such as a series of workshops and cooking classes this summer. He also would like to see the facility at local farmers markets and offer Loyola students and staff a
community-supported agriculture program — a system where they pay an annual fee to the farm and get a share of its produce.

“This is the beginning,” said Tuchman. “This is all the end of the first year.”