

University Garden Stakeholders: Student, Industry, and Community Connections

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SUMMARY. University gardens have a rather unique set of stakeholders, internal and external, compared with non-academic public gardens. Undergraduate students spend a significant amount of time learning in, as well as assisting with, the garden. These students ideally become active alumni with continuing interests in the garden. Landscape and nursery industry professionals, many of whom are graduates, parents of graduates, or employ graduates from the program, are in a position to assist with in-kind donations of plant material, equipment, and expertise. Community stakeholders exist on two levels: The campus community is comprised of faculty, staff, and students who come to the garden to relax and reflect. The greater civic or regional community views the garden and staff as a source of creative inspiration, expertise, and education. The campus and civic community value the garden and in turn contribute by volunteering their time as well as fiscal support by attending garden workshops, seminars, and special events. Garden directors and staff should make every effort to strengthen these connections and bring to university administrators' attention the importance of active support from these stakeholders groups.

University gardens have a rather unique set of stakeholders compared with non-academic public gardens. They are usually affiliated with a specific department and/or college, are administered by faculty who may have other responsibilities/appointments, use students in the workforce, and focus on education, research, and outreach. Non-academic public gardens usually have education components, but these are often secondary to display, plant collections, and/or conservation missions.

Stakeholder identification and services provided

A stakeholder is generally defined as someone that has an interest or concern in something and is involved in or affected by a course of action. Stakeholders can be involved in the planning and implementation of events and projects as well as in the evaluation of programs.

STUDENTS AND FACULTY. University and college gardens are nearly universally described as “living laboratories” in their mission statements. These gardens serve research, teaching, and experiential learning functions (Lewis and Affolter, 1999).

Gardens are critical tools for teaching identification, use, and care of woody and herbaceous landscape plants. The value of this function cannot be understated. A recent national survey created a list of competencies specific to a horticulture curriculum (Basinger et al., 2009). The Delphi study rated “plant identification” as one of the most important competencies. Gardens also give instructors a venue for creating and executing hands-on projects. Landscape contracting students can create designs, build structures, and install hardscapes and planting beds as discreet exercises or as part of a holistic experience from start to finish. Existing features provide opportunities for practice in landscape maintenance as well as environmental awareness and stewardship. University gardens can also re-focus their roles as collaborator and partner beyond the horticulture or plant science student. The University of California-Davis Arboretum has framed their organizational culture on the “learning organization” model and created a multidisciplinary program involving students from the arts and sciences (Socolofsky and Burke, 2007).

INDUSTRY. Students previously involved with the garden often move on to careers and business ownership within the horticulture industry. Field days, conferences, symposia, and other events bring the green industry to campus. Alumni can play active roles on

steering committees, advisory boards, and in fundraising efforts. Many university gardens also incorporate plant trials as a component feature such as the seasonal trials at the JC Raulston Arboretum (North Carolina State University, Raleigh), or as their primary display, as with The Trial Gardens at the University of Georgia, Athens (Armitage and Green, 2001). Plant breeders and seed companies pay a fee for their selections to be grown alongside the competition. Students and staff evaluate performance and communicate the results to not only the propagule source, but to gardeners and the industry. Revenue from conducting plant trials can be sufficient to support student workers and interns, providing additional educational opportunities.

COMMUNITY. The campus community (faculty, staff, and students) and the civic community value the garden. In addition to sports, the fine and performing arts, and other university outreach activities, campus gardens offer another way for community members to connect with the campus and fulfill the desire for affiliation with the local institution of higher learning. The educational experiences noted previously are not exclusive to students; community stakeholders can enjoy similar programs and educational opportunities provided by faculty and staff. Gardens can have a wider reach than the usual community radius of visitation; many gardens engage citizens throughout their respective states (and beyond) with conservation and environmental stewardship programs. Donaldson (2009) notes the proliferation of “citizen science” programs offered by public gardens, especially in the area of conservation. Volunteers collect data on rare and endangered species, and monitor re-introductions and invasive plants. One example is the Botanical Guardians program, a joint effort of the Georgia Plant Conservation Alliance and The State Botanical Garden of Georgia (Ceska and Alley, 2004).

Part of a university garden's service to stakeholders is the role as a retreat from the bustle and pressures of campus life. Studies by Gross and Lane (2007) found that the concept of the garden as retreat is very significant and can be seen to be reflected in different ways across the lifespan in

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the expression of participants' gardening experience. Particularly in late adulthood, the gardening experience represents continuity, ongoing activity and purpose, a shared interest, and social context. This may help to explain the popularity of garden volunteer programs. Ulrich et al. (1991) noted the restorative influence of natural, non-threatening surroundings to those under stress. In the days following the 16 Apr. 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech, the author observed visitorship to the Hahn Horticulture Garden increased markedly. Stress reduction can be a reason for visiting a public garden, and in turn, there is a self-perceived reduction in stress resulting from the visit (Bennett and Swasey, 1996).

Stakeholder support of the garden

As more services and opportunities are provided to stakeholder groups, the perceived value of the garden increases. These connections are especially important in light of budget cuts, restricted funds, and other fiscal challenges. Stephens et al. (2006) conducted a survey of four university gardens; all of the directors noted the importance of maintaining a strong relationship with the university. Communication of the garden's value to constituents was cited as critical. Universities in turn should recognize the value of campus gardens as important educational and cultural amenities. Klatt and Pickering (2003) note that university gardens must actively and continually promote services and value offered to maintain or increase relevance to university administrators. Documenting stakeholder connections and support can build the case for value. In addition, if the documentation can use qualitative or quantitative research methods, the process of documenting stakeholder connections can add to the scholarly record of the faculty director. Support can be monetary and in-kind, through direct donations or the gift of service. Community support in the form of membership programs is common; "Friends of the Garden" groups can be autonomous or fall within the

garden administration. Community attendance at fundraisers such as plant sales, workshops, and special events provides a substantial portion of funds for many smaller gardens. Additional sources of fiscal support to university gardens are well documented by Stephens et al. (2006). Volunteerism is essential to the success of many public gardens, whether university based or not. The benefits of volunteers are well known, but in the case of a university garden, the ability to quantify the benefits to the garden and the volunteers is especially important. State non-profit organizations such as cooperative extension and 4-H in the Commonwealth of Virginia attribute a value of \$20.25 per hour; this is an accepted source of matching funds by many granting agencies per the policy of the Financial Accounting Standards Board (Independent Sector, 2010). In a case study specific to the Iowa State University garden, Haynes and Trexler (2003) recommended a cost-benefit analysis to help in attracting and retaining volunteers. However, their results noted that volunteer services do come at a cost to the institution in terms of training, supervision, and recognition/rewards.

Many horticulture alumni find themselves in a position to "give back" to a place that helped them develop their skills. In the case of the Hahn Horticulture Garden at Virginia Tech, alumni-owned businesses specializing in landscape design-build-maintain services are eager to offer demonstrations, seminars, etc., as it provides an opportunity to not only help their alma mater, but also to recruit new talent. Nursery and greenhouse owners and growers generously provide plants for renovation and expansion projects. Recognizing and optimizing these connections falls not only to the garden director, but also to other faculty who use the garden for teaching, research, and outreach. The commitment or active support of all these stakeholder groups is essential to the efforts and success of the garden. Garden directors, staff, and college- and university-level development personnel can promote and enhance these stakeholder relationships.

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