



# Student Volunteer Ideal Type Formation in Community Gardens: Case Study in Gainesville, Florida

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## Abstract

A community garden (CG) is a piece of land in which community members come together to grow plants, often food. Historically, gardening programs in the United States have been a response to economic shocks, emphasizing personal responsibility by growing one's own food to overcome economic issues. Frequently, their purposes include creating social capital and more sustainable food options, with many other ancillary benefits in health, education, value formation, and financial gain. Volunteers are necessary to achieve this. However, student volunteerism in a CG carries many challenges. College towns, including Gainesville, Florida, have a large proportion of transient college-aged residents because of the dominant role that a university holds in that city. These volunteers, being transient, may not contribute to or benefit from the community building central to a CG's purpose. This is exacerbated by a town-gown divide, the long-standing tensions between the university and the rest of a city. This paper draws from field notes and informal interviews in a community garden located in a college town to investigate these issues. A Weberian ideal type model for student volunteers is constructed, identifying four key characteristics: consistency, willingness to learn, social competency, and self-sufficiency. This ideal type model is then compared to reality in the garden, providing insight into why universities should prepare student volunteers to maximize impact and bridge the town-gown divide. *Keywords:* community garden, college town, volunteer, ideal type, town-gown divide

## Introduction

### Community Gardens

A community garden (CG) is a piece of land in which community members come together to grow plants, often food. Historically, CG programs in the United States have emphasized personal responsibility in overcoming economic issues, such as recessionary periods (Pudup 2008). Thomas Bassett (1979) considers CGs to be a response to stressors that the nation's "cultural framework" experienced.

Some of the first urban gardens were found in schools during the 1890s (Lawson, 2005). Support came from parents with agrarian backgrounds, who wanted to expose their children to

the moral values that they believed came with farming and gardening as well as the tangible skills they would gain (Earl and Thompson, 2020).

During the World Wars, the federal government engaged in wide-scale propaganda campaigns. This included marketing urban gardens as American patriotism in great contrast to the Great Depression, when gardens were seen as a means of survival. After World War II, messaging surrounding gardening shifted from “a citizen’s duty to a personal hobby” (Lawson, 2005, p. 205). The 1970s saw a resurgence led primarily by organizations, beginning the widespread use of the term community gardening (Saldivar, 2004). Here, “gardening was the means, not the end” (Lawson, 2005, p. 231).

Clearly, these gardens have taken many forms throughout history, which has been identified to result in a lack of clarity in the definition of a CG (Firth, 2011). Labels such as CGs, allotment gardens, or urban farms often overlap in purpose and use in the literature (Harada et al., 2021; Čepić, 2017). Allotment gardens are defined by their individualistic nature. Plots are separated and tended to by private individuals. However, CGs and urban farms can, and often do, share this feature. The defining aspect of an urban farm is a focus on the physical act of cultivating land, particularly land in untraditional urban settings (Harada et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2021). What distinguishes a CG is its guiding purpose. The modern CG exists for the sake of community and garnering social capital, rather than solely for the creation of food. This is complicated by self-identification that combines and confuses these definitions (New York City Housing Authority, 2013; Gainesville Giving Garden, n.d.). For example, programs will interchangeably refer to themselves as gardens or farms when describing themselves on their websites.

CGs are constantly created and closed with varying levels of stability across the United States. The biggest reasons identified for the discontinuation of a CG are a lack of interest and a loss of land (Lawson, 2005), making social organizing and grassroots support of paramount importance. Long-term individual engagement can be a form of “embodied sustainability” for a CG (Turner, 2011). This can pose a problem for CGs in areas where that community is consistently shifting, such as the college town.

### **Gainesville, a College Town**

The college town is a phenomenon defined as any city where a university plays a dominant role. This phenomenon extends across the United States, forming an “academic archipelago” (Gumprecht, 2003, p. 1). The university plays a large role in all aspects of a city, from cultural place-making to government policy. Residents not tied to the university can feel frustrated; they are often excluded from college policy decision-making that greatly impacts them (Rousmaniere, 2021, Mapes et al., 2017). Studentification, the process of university students moving into a community and greatly changing it, is perceived as a nuisance disruptive to the cultural character of neighborhoods and has been well documented to occur in college towns (Woldorf & Weiss, 2018; Gumbrecht, 2003). Inequalities are exacerbated, such as with educational achievement between children of faculty compared to other children in a college town (Maranto 2015).

Thus, a “town/gown divide” exists (Maranto, 2015; Rousmaniere, 2021). “Town” residents feel deprioritized and disregarded by the “gown”, those with ties to the university. The “gown” includes both students and faculty, although this paper will focus on students. Despite this relationship, local residents often don’t blame individual students for the decline their neighborhoods experience. Instead, there is a sense of larger political and economic forces – the university, city officials, and local developers – overshadowing their interests. Neighborhoods become more polarized over time, with middle-class neighborhoods being replaced by more homogenous areas for the “knowledge elite” and lower-income workers (Foote, 2017). This is part of a larger trend of gentrification in urban settings (Lees, 2008), but the setting of a college town exacerbates these inequalities. As colleges and universities increase enrollment without regard for the impact on local neighborhoods, this town/gown divide deepens.

The University of Florida (UF) in Gainesville, Florida has been consistently regarded in the literature as a college town (Redden, 2021; Foote, 2017; Gumprecht, 2003). The City of Gainesville had a population of 141,085 in 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020) and the University of Florida had a total enrollment of 53,372 (Institutional Planning and Research, 2021) for both undergraduate and graduate students. According to the Census Bureau’s information for counting college students, both students residing on- and off-campus should be captured by Gainesville’s population count (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

The 1970s marked a simultaneous increase for UF in student enrollment and a decrease in students living on-campus. UF's President Marston greatly cut the budget and staff for the Off-Campus Housing Office (Rousmaniere, 2021, p. 332). This heightened existing town/gown tensions consistent with relationships seen in other college towns. While UF continued to grow, blight and poor quality of life were identified by city planners across Gainesville's downtown area (Redden, 2021).

### **Case Study: Gainesville Community Garden**

Unique from other community gardening programs in the area, one Gainesville, Florida CG is on the facilities of a homeless resource center. Guests – the term given to those utilizing the facility's resources including emergency shelter, housing assistance, or goods like clothing, food, and tents – can individually “own” those boxes, taking care of them and receiving their harvest. As their website banner displays, the garden's mission is “empowering individuals who are experiencing homelessness or food insecurity through horticulture” (2019). Volunteers – those giving time to the garden who aren't part of the impacted group of people experiencing homelessness – tend to communal areas and boxes whose owners gave permission.

Upon entering the garden in October 2021, communally grown sections bookended the outer limits. The middle section of the garden held three rows of approximately seven raised beds each. The beds, made of reclaimed wood, were constructed by volunteers, though some were slightly rotted and needed replacement. Many had painted wooden stakes that labeled ownership to an individual. Many were well tended to, evidenced by their freshly watered soil shining with reflected sunlight. Their plants were neat rows of small, but sturdily growing plants whose bright green contrasted with the deep dark dirt. Others didn't have the same careful attention paid to them. Dollar weed and other unwanted weeds, like unruly spearmint, covered the boxes' surfaces and one could hardly see dirt through the growth (fieldnotes, October 2021).

Speaking to the garden's director, one could sense a wariness towards certain college student volunteers. Even when saying otherwise, many students were one-time volunteers that came and went. Unmotivated college students were looking to check off a box, coming solely to fill a service requirement. The same issues extended to student groups and organizations that brought groups to the garden. When they didn't make the right preparations, they brought in unmotivated students and got little done (fieldnotes, October 2021 to March 2022).

How can student volunteers help fulfill an organization's purpose, rather than being a burden? Gainesville, Florida is a college town with a large transient college-aged population, mainly students. Many of these students serve as volunteers – with a variety of motivations for doing so. This paper seeks to explore the relationship between college students and community gardens. From a brief review of the present literature, the modern community garden and college town is defined and documented. Focusing on a community garden in northeast Gainesville, an ideal type is then constructed for their student volunteers. However, it is important to note that students are not the entire volunteer base for this garden, where there is a diverse range of ages and occupations. This will draw from field notes within the garden and interviews with student volunteers and university staff.

### **Ideal Type Construction**

The model of an ideal type comes from Max Weber (1949) as a way to analyze socially constructed ideas with respect to reality. It is not constructed “as an average of” all instances (Weber, 1949, p. 90), but a selection of characteristics to act as a “benchmark for comparative studies” (Aronovitch, 2012). Creating an ideal type is useful for community garden volunteers to identify areas of improvement for individuals and clearly communicate qualities that one should aspire to.

While an ideal type provides a framework to overlay reality onto and identify asymmetries, it should not be mistaken for true reality. Characteristics identified will vary in other gardens based on a CG's priorities and structure. Thus, “the garden” should henceforth be taken to reference the CG located on the facilities of a homeless resource center in a college town located in the southeast United States. The four characteristics identified are consistency, willingness to learn, social competency, and self-sufficiency.

Keeping in mind the context of college towns and community gardening practices, four characteristics have been identified to construct the ideal type of what a student volunteer in the Gainesville CG described above ought to be, created from field notes and informal interviews with leaders and volunteers.

### **Consistency**

At the garden, open volunteer workdays occur weekly on Sundays. Ideal consistency is committing to showing up every Sunday and then doing so, or communicating when not planning to come. The best contributions are made to the gardens by those that repeatedly show up when expected. Punctuality also plays a role. Tasks for the day are typically informally explained at the beginning of a workday in the garden. New volunteers are given a tour and “orientation” to get them acquainted with the CG’s set-up and purpose. Late volunteers require the director to repeat themselves, wasting time.

More informally, consistency creates trust. Since the garden’s conception, many poor experiences of untrained and unwilling student volunteers have created negative sentiments towards the group. The town-gown divide supports the construct of student volunteers as a group of like individuals and reinforces this negative portrayal of students. Only consistent interaction paired with the other three characteristics can overcome these negative sentiments, which are supported by lived experience and local historical memory.

It is ideal for volunteers to be consistent due to the capacity challenges of the garden, but it is important to note a meta-analysis’ findings that “commitment has relatively little direct influence on performance in most instances” (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990, p. 184). This is applicable to the garden as well. In a CG, tasks such as weeding and harvesting are simple and rote once explained. New student volunteers, once assigned to a task and guided through it, are often able to perform it well. Rather, the burden of inconsistency is due to the additional resources required to get past the initial learning curve of new, inexperienced student volunteers.

### **Willingness to Learn**

Consistent adult volunteers had the largest wealth of knowledge to share. One volunteer that had been involved in the garden for nearly two years enjoyed involving newer volunteers in carpentry projects for the garden. Even when students had no prior knowledge, he would give hands-on lessons while working to construct a garden bed or deconstruct a structure to salvage the wood for later use. Another would frequently suggest more efficient tools to use for a task. An experienced herbalist in the garden was known to have the most knowledge of plants’ medicinal qualities. A student volunteer should be willing to actively listen to this practical advice and apply it to the way they work in the CG.

Student volunteers should be able to approach interactions with guests sensitively and learn from the lived experiences of individuals. One volunteer stated:

[Volunteering] humbles you in a way. I think it is good for [students] to get kind of a real-world experience that you won't usually get in college instead of learning something in class, just learning info... you can actually go out and do something about it. Being in the real world [lets you] see how your actual work makes a difference (interview with author, March 3, 2022).

Students often had little-to-no prior experience or transferable skills from working in gardens. The lack of these skills, while not desired, did not appear to be a barrier to achieving the CG's goals. Volunteers of different experience levels working together provided many opportunities to learn from each other.

The importance of willingness to learn complicates the role of values in the garden. New student volunteers had some degree of both environmental and social/community-oriented values. The presence of at least one of these was what compelled them to begin volunteering specifically at the garden. However, conversations with others and experiences in the garden developed both of these values deeper. This is consistent with the subject formation identified by Agrawal, in that environmental beliefs were "formulated in response to experiences and outcomes" (2005, p. 163).

### **Social Competency**

Social competency is the willingness to openly interact with the guests and other volunteers in the garden. Interactions between volunteers and guests were commonly expressed as an appeal to volunteering at the garden. The garden's purpose shows an interesting connection between the environmental values and practices associated with the community garden. Here, the practice is cultivating plots of vegetables, medicinal plants, and wildflowers. While environmental values were initially expected to greatly guide the purpose of the CG, they appear secondary to the benefits it seeks for the affected group. In particular, the formation of social capital. These are directly caused by the environmental practice of community gardening, but these practices are largely means.

This characteristic is crucial in fulfilling the purpose of the garden. Other volunteers echoed these beliefs in conversations held at the garden. One expressed:

The gardening knowledge just comes with it, but obviously that's not... Even [the director] says that's not the real reason we're there. She'd much rather have someone connect with the people there and invite them to garden... have a peaceful experience and facilitate that. That's more of your purpose as a volunteer than to actually maintain the garden (interview with author, March 2, 2022)

Student volunteers should also be able to talk to the main beneficiaries of the garden, guests experiencing homelessness. Guests are in the garden on workdays asking nearby volunteers for information or imparting wisdom as they tend to their garden bed. Social competency includes both the ability to interact with guests and effectively communicate the knowledge one gains through a willingness to learn. New volunteers should also actively seek social connections to find a place in the group dynamic.

### **Self-Sufficiency**

Self-sufficiency is learned over time, built from a foundational willingness to learn. An ideal student volunteer completes tasks with minimal supervision and guidance. They successfully complete these tasks and the outcome is beneficial to the garden.

However, total self-sufficiency is impractical and unideal. Helping other volunteers and asking for help generates social capital, contributing to an aspect of the garden's purpose. Instead, student volunteers should receive guidance initially. Through a willingness to learn, their body of knowledge of the garden's functions should grow over time, relying less heavily on the supervision of others. This is especially important in decreasing reliance on the garden's director for tasks to do.

Mistakes in the garden are hardly disastrous. There is room for error in gardening tasks like harvesting and weeding, so student volunteers can make mistakes and learn from them. Harvesting too much kale may stunt its future growth, but this mistake only lasts for a season and can easily be learned from with the help of others.



### **Deviation from the Ideal Type Model**

Actual student volunteers often deviate from these ideal characteristics, often unconsciously. For instance, levels of intrinsic motivation vary greatly from one student volunteer to another in that some volunteer out of interest, while others come to boost a graduate school application. Additionally, external factors affect students' ability to consistently show up.

The garden is a non-profit with limited resources, such as “volunteer resource management capacity”, the time and money dedicated to training volunteers and supervising them (Rehnborg, 2010). The garden's director is the sole staff member with innumerable responsibilities, including directly interacting with volunteers and managing day-to-day operations. Non-student long-time volunteers help to identify and supervise projects. The presence of these informal leaders increases the garden's ability to take in new student volunteers, but its capacity is still greatly limited.

This limitation exacerbates the need for student volunteers that more closely align with the ideal type. Doing so mitigates the capacity challenges by reducing the resources that need to be dedicated to volunteer management. A consistent volunteer needs less time dedicated to them, on average, as they have already completed orientation and are constantly gaining experience. Willingness to learn creates self-sufficiency over time, as volunteers gain experience with the garden. Social competency is crucial to facilitate building social capital and educational experiences that students and guests both benefit from.

### **Implications**

Creating an ideal type for student volunteers in a community garden has several implications. It creates expectations for incoming volunteers to be mindful of their own behavior, making themselves more consistent, willing to learn, socially competent, and self-sufficient.

It also identifies areas of improvement for students' institutions. At the garden, many didn't find individual students fully at fault for being poor volunteers, similar to the reaction of neighbors on their negative impact on Gainesville communities (Rousmaniere, 2021). Instead, the university itself holds a responsibility to better train its students on informed, cognizant volunteerism. Universities, especially in college towns, have ample resources that give them

hegemony over the cities they reside in (Gumprecht, 2003). Some of these financial resources should go towards the further development and strengthening of volunteer resource management capacity initiatives. This is one way that universities can repair the negative impacts they have on local communities in consultation with community partners. Resources that reach the entire body of student volunteers at an institution and establish a foundation of what it means to be a good volunteer must be created.

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