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COMMENTARY

Staff and student engagement on and perceptions of a college campus's urban farm

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Abstract

In this commentary, we provide a snapshot into the experiences and perspectives of college students and staff engaged in an on-campus urban

farm run by a college. By delving into the challenges faced by staff members and student workers, we seek to identify nuanced areas for improvement in the management, communication, and promotion of the on-campus farm's work. This commentary emphasizes the imperative to bridge the gap between students and staff, address negative perceptions, and amplify the educational and career value of on-campus farming experiences.

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Keywords

college campus, food justice, student engagement, urban farming, campus farm

Introduction

On-campus urban farms stand as vital hubs for fostering agricultural education and community

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engagement (Berman, 2020; Bradley & Galt, 2014; Parr & Trexler, 2011; Sager & Sherard, 2022). This commentary unpacks the intricate dynamics within the on-campus farming environment by examining the experiences of two groups: staff members and student workers. Understanding their perspectives is crucial for cultivating an environment that maximizes the potential of college campus farming initiatives (Evans & Roggio, 2023; Walter, 2013).

Context

The farm is located on a college campus in an urban setting in the southwestern United States. The college boasts a work program model, where students receive Federal Work-Study awards. Approximately 10 years ago, the college converted one of its sports fields into a four-acre urban farm, which continues to be used to grow seasonal vegetables. The farm was started to combat the college's food desert status and take an asset-based approach (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003) to food justice, such as by leveraging existing activities, resources, and investments within the community (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Bradley & Herrera, 2016). The farm's mission states:

To transform the health and well-being of under-resourced communities in [the] southern [part of the city] by providing fresh, healthy, affordable food options and educating and empowering future generations to take better care of themselves, their environments, and their communities. ([Farm website], n.d.¹)

Interviewees for our research ranged in age from 20 to 55, and were made up of six Black individuals, one Latina women, and one white women. Staff members (Nancy, Dan, and Kelley²) played instrumental roles in the farm's day-to-day operations, oversight of student workers and navigating the multifaceted challenges of college campus farming. Current student workers (Michael, Jane, and Audrey) provided their perspectives based on their varied roles within the college and at the college's farm. The student workers undergo an inter-

view process to determine which work placement best aligns with their interests, schedule, or the campus's needs. The students are expected to work 15 hours each week to receive their Federal Work-Study tuition benefits, as well as a cash stipend.

Staff Perspectives

The staff members, especially those directly involved in college campus farming, managed day-to-day operations, oversaw student workers, and established connections with consumers and community members. The diverse responsibilities highlighted the intricate balance required for successful on-campus farming initiatives. Kelley, a passionate advocate for agricultural education, expressed her commitment to teaching students and the community about different cultivation methods: "You can grow in the ground, you can grow in your pot. You can grow in some water." Despite this enthusiasm, challenges were highlighted by other staff members. Dan, reflecting on a lack of clear leadership in the organization, discussed the demotivation that arises when new ideas get overlooked: "[There are] so many leaders that it's hard to know which one you should present to, for it to have any kind of impact, and historically it hasn't really gone anywhere when I've tried." Nancy, shedding light on the negative positioning of college campus farming, articulated how it is perceived as a form of punishment for student workers: "You're going out there, you're working in the field, it's grunt work, it's drudgery."

Student Perspectives

Michael's narrative brought attention to a perceived communication gap between students and staff, emphasizing a lack of acknowledgment for students' concerns and input: "The gap is when the older folks will tell them: 'Oh yeah, y'all go out there, y'all do this, y'all do that.' However, the students are like, 'But what about this and what about that.' We don't have a rebuttal for the staff because after we hear them, they just forget about the students, and that's why the students leave, because it's like a cliff-hanger." Audrey and Jane added

¹ For confidentiality and anonymity, the reference has been anonymized.

² All names used are pseudonyms.

insights about negative perceptions of on-campus farming as a low-status position contributing to high turnover rates: “Some people just don’t like being outside; some people maybe hate bugs and getting their hands dirty.”

While the physical demands and initial challenges were acknowledged, the students’ experiences also revealed a lack of appreciation for the educational and career value of on-campus farming. Michael noted that his peers often struggle with the demands of outdoor work and suggested that a lack of interest in farming and the perception of the farm as a “bottom-of-the-barrel position” contribute to negative perceptions across campus.

Challenges and Opportunities

Unraveling these perspectives provides a foundation for understanding both the challenges and opportunities in on-campus farming. The dichotomy between staff and student perceptions and experiences calls for targeted interventions to bridge this communication and expectation gap. One key aspect is the need for clear and effective leadership organization to ensure that students’ ideas and concerns are not overlooked. This would foster a more inclusive and responsive college campus farming environment.

Beyond communication challenges, the negative perception of an on-campus farm as low-status work demands attention. Understanding that some students may not be initially prepared for the physical demands of farm work is crucial. It requires an integrated approach, combining dedication to the work with foundational farming education to overcome any initial challenges.

Potential Solutions

In an effort to address these multifaceted challenges, participants proposed various solutions. Dan, emphasizing the need for a structured approach, proposed tying farm work to an agriculture degree, promoting the development of 21st-century skills, and fostering critical-thinking abilities: “Work ethic, time management, problem-solving, being able to help students.” Current student

workers emphasized the importance of dedication and foundational farming education to overcome initial challenges: “Being dedicated to [the farm]” and “teaching students the basics [of farming], then putting them in the field, to make them feel more comfortable.”

Addressing the disconnect between the educational and career value of on-campus farming and students’ negative perceptions is pivotal. This requires a concerted effort from both staff and students to recognize the broader benefits of on-campus farming experiences. Furthermore, integrating college-level farming initiatives with academic programs can enhance the perceived value of the work, fostering a sense of purpose and alignment with students’ career goals. At the current time, the college does not offer any classes or programs relating to agriculture or food systems.

Our interviews with students and staff underscore the significance of addressing communication gaps, negative perceptions, and organizational challenges in an urban farm on a college campus. By implementing the suggested solutions, such as integrating farm work with academic programs and highlighting the educational and career benefits, colleges can enhance the overall experience for both staff and student workers (Berman, 2020; Walter, 2013).

We encourage any college with an on-campus farm to evaluate the narrative around its farm, promoting it as an educational and rewarding endeavor that contributes to personal growth and community welfare (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Hoey et al., 2018). Further research and practical interventions are warranted to solidify the transformative potential of on-campus farming experiences (Layman & Civita, 2022; Sager et al., 2022a, 2022b). Recognizing the diverse perspectives and experiences of participants can lead to a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in on-campus farming, guiding future initiatives toward a more inclusive and effective model (Emery & Flora, 2006; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; Sweeney et al., 2015).



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