



# Supporting Student and Community Connections through Campus Gardening

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### **Executive Summary**

This paper discusses the role that campus gardens play in the overarching student and area community, as well as their effects in the political and economic realm. It will focus on the benefits of a campus garden on vacant IU South Bend property, primarily Greenlawn Hall. This paper will draw specific examples from college campus gardens across the United States, and it will describe how these gardens are contributing to a more sustainable environment. It will emphasize the lack of access to fresh produce for citizens of various cities, and how college campus gardens are helping to solve this problem by utilizing urban agricultural practices.

### Recommendations:

Adopt a garden plan for the vacant site located at Greenlawn Hall, in order to promote sustainability, student involvement, community outreach and education, and overall health and wellness. The garden plan could include the following steps initiated by IU South Bend:

- Instigate the testing of heavy metals on the vacant site to prepare for the approval and grounding of garden beds  
OR
- Construct raised beds on the vacant site
- Establish a ‘garden group’ of volunteer students or faculty members to begin the planting and maintenance of the garden plots

In addition to the above steps, this paper suggests the use of harvested produce for use in the campus Grille or other university eating establishments.

## Introduction

Since the incredible expansion of food production technology birthed during the Industrial Period, the United States has continued to cope with the ever-changing social and economic system of food. Darrin Nordahl, author of 'Public Produce', defines these ever-present food issues in regards to class and inner-city citizens;

“While the exploding middle class and higher socioeconomic strata enjoyed benefits from the industrial agriculture boom, the inner-city poor were still left without an adequate supply of food. As suburbs consumed farmland outside the cities, and supermarkets and grocery stores followed the mass emigration of the post-war population, food problems were exacerbated for inner-city residents” (138)

Due to these sweeping social changes, residents of inner-cities were left with less grocery stores, less fresh produce, and ultimately, less *food*. According to a study cited in the book 'Urban Agriculture' by Phoebe Connelly, “women living in ‘food insecure’ areas were more likely to be overweight and thus at risk for obesity-related illnesses like diabetes and heart disease” (50). Unfortunately, these ‘food insecure’ areas are beginning to spread and grow larger, prompting a nation-wide attempt to bring back whole, fresh foods to city residents. The solutions created in response to the food crisis have not been easily achieved, but one of the most creative and inspiring blueprints for creating change have been vacant lot gardens, brought about by practices otherwise known as urban agriculture. Most of these gardens have been created and tended by volunteer city-dwellers who want to make a difference; the food grown there is shared among members of the community, and many other city residents help care for the plants in the garden. The result is a shared community space where citizens can work together and share the rewards of work. Recently, college campuses across the United States have started to take part in urban

agriculture, reaping the same benefits while applying it to their educational communities. This paper discusses the role that campus gardens play in the overarching student and area community, as well as their effects in the political and economic realm. It will focus on the benefits of a campus garden on vacant IU South Bend property, primarily Greenlawn Hall. This paper will draw specific examples from college campus gardens across the United States, and it will describe how these gardens are contributing to a more sustainable environment. It will emphasize the lack of access to fresh produce for citizens of various cities, and how college campus gardens are helping to solve this problem by utilizing urban agricultural practices.

### **Problem Definition**

Due to the changes made during the Industrial Revolution, our food system has altered considerably. As more and more of the American population is concentrated in city and suburban areas, it is becoming increasingly difficult for these people to gain access to locally grown foods. This is because farms and cities have not coexisted in the same environment; most farms are out of the immediate reach of city dwellers, forcing them to find their produce at the grocery store or even at the nearest fast-food chain. For people living in low-income neighborhoods, their food choices are few. Ron Finley, an urban gardener living in South Los Angeles, brought the reality of food deserts to view during his TED Talk; “the truth is that the area comprises liquor stores, fast food and vacant lots, and it epitomizes the stark reality that 26.5 million Americans live in a food desert. Truth is, “the drive-thrus are killing more people than the drive-bys,” says Finley”. Finley’s talk was a grim reminder of the kind of fractured food system many Americans live in. Food deserts are very real, and they contribute to heart disease, diabetes, and other serious health problems throughout the country; and this is only because inner-city dwellers have such a difficult time finding access to fresh, affordable, and healthy food.

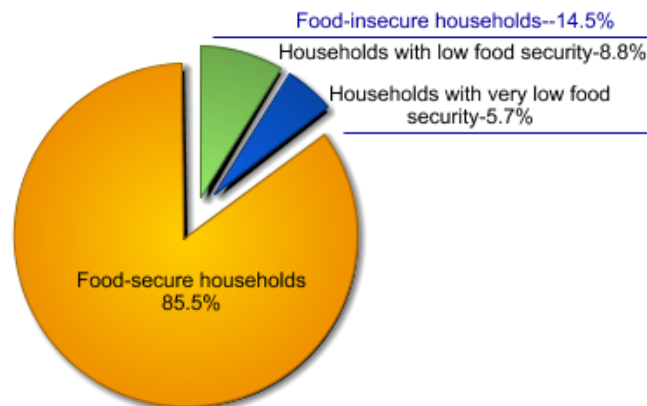
## High-Level Solution

According to a census from the Economic Research Service, 14.5% of the American population is food-insecure: That leaves nearly 41 million Americans at the food-insecure

level. However, there are solutions to the problems of food

deserts and food insecurity. Gardener Ron Finley points out the obvious solution himself; ““There are 26 square miles of vacant lots in the city,” Finley says. “That’s 20 Central Parks; that’s enough space for 724,838,400 tomato plants””. With the amount of space available throughout cities, urban agriculture could be an excellent opportunity to feed people living in food-insecure households. In fact, an inner-city gardening group called City Slickers found great success while encouraging methods such as backyard gardening; “According to City Slicker, 40 percent of the 2006 participants were able to grow half or more of their household’s produce, 30 percent experienced a positive change in their health, and 50 percent added more fresh vegetables to their diet” (Connelly, 51). This means that urban agriculture provides much needed food to city families at a lower price, all while supplying healthy alternatives to the children and adults who are ultimately surrounded by fast-food restaurants. Examples of Urban Agriculture in city areas have proven to be a great success, and these techniques applied to the university community can also have the same affects. However, college campus gardens can also supply different kinds of aid and experience due to their unique location.

U.S. households by food security status, 2012



Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the December 2012 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

## **Solution Details**

Given the problems of our current food system, campus gardens can be extremely beneficial to the students and the surrounding community at large. This is because not only do campus gardens provide fresh produce to the community, they also provide valuable learning experiences and opportunities for students and citizens alike. Campus gardens promote health and are a great way to encourage relations between the city and the university through the sale of campus-grown food. This can certainly target the problem of inner-city access to fresh foods; no longer will city residents be entirely dependent on grocery store chains or fast-food restaurants. Campus gardens can also assist in the education of students by providing access to a space where plants can be studied and discussed in a curriculum. According to the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education, “More than 100 higher education institutions have established community gardens on campus” (AASHE). With all of these potential benefits at hand, campuses across the country have found that university gardens can be a great success.

### **Westminster College (Salt Lake City, Utah)**

Students at Westminster College have been applying their campus garden to multiple aspects of their community. The system they use for tending and selling produce is quite simple, as stated by their garden website; “Student volunteers maintain the garden, and the produce is available each week at a campus farm stand”. With the students volunteering to help one another, a great sense of unity and pride is created. Even more, the students are able to share their hard work with other members of the campus and the community by selling their organic, locally-grown foods. The garden website also advocates the use of further volunteers for research benefits, such as brain-storming new compost techniques and better, more sustainable options

around campus. Another great option the garden offers are educational classes and seminars that are centered on gardening techniques and other food and sustainability related topics; “The full campus garden program also involves monthly cooking classes, a fall food film series, discussion groups, [and] workshops” (Westminster). In this way, the garden does not only provide fresh produce, but also a tight-knit student and city community where all members can learn about healthier and more sustainable options.

### **Smith College (Northampton, Massachusetts)**

Students at the Smith College garden have also been attempting new and creative strategies on campus. An article by USA Today quotes Laura Sheys, a senior who has been witnessing the benefits of the garden for years; “Everyone I talk to about the garden is really excited about it being here — I think that having a garden on campus that students have built themselves gives people a sense of ownership”. For the students at Smith College, the garden is more than just a plot of raised beds, it is a real sense of pride and proof of their hard work and dedication to sustainable practices. Besides providing ownerships to those attending Smith, the education benefits of the garden are extremely helpful to students taking part in various studies. Sheys continues to state that, “academic classes are really connected to the garden too. Students have done special studies about the garden and classes in landscape studies, horticulture, art, engineering and environmental science can relate to the garden and fulfill a need of hands-on learning that fits in really well with what students are doing in the classroom” (Kelly, USA Today). In this sense, the campus garden also provides great learning experiences for students at Smith, who actively attempt to apply the garden to their everyday studies. Ultimately, campus gardens can pertain to a variety of different social, educational, and economic issues.

SOCIAL	EDUCATIONAL	ECONOMIC
Encourages work and contacts between students, community, and faculty	Provides sustainable learning opportunities for students that can be applied to their studies	Promotes trade between students and community for fair prices with good quality

The construction of a garden plot on the vacant space surrounding Greenlawn Hall would be a sustainable way to combine the use of vacant spaces (a technique of urban agriculture) and student involvement and activity. Not only would the campus garden contribute to a more sustainable and healthy community, it would enforce environmentally sustainable practices in that it would use vacant space for the planting of fresh produce. The most efficient way to instigate such a plan would be to adopt a garden plan for the vacant site located at Greenlawn Hall, in order to promote sustainability, student involvement, community outreach and education, and overall health and wellness. The garden plan could include the following steps initiated by IU South Bend:

- Instigate the testing of heavy metals on the vacant site to prepare for the approval and grounding of garden beds
- OR
- Construct raised beds on the vacant site
- Establish a ‘garden group’ of volunteer students or faculty members to begin the planting and maintenance of the garden plots

The above testimonials have shown that student volunteers take pride in their work in campus gardens, which suggests that IU South Bend students would be willing to volunteer, or show an active interest in the benefits the garden has to offer. Not only could the garden be used for student and community purposes, but the produce could also be available for sale in the campus Grille or other on-site eating establishments. This solution would encourage healthier eating



habits among students and citizens purchasing the produce. It can provide relief to local families and students who cannot afford the organic produce sold at the local farmer's market. The garden could also be a great educational tool for aspiring education majors who wish to incorporate sustainable curriculum into elementary, middle, and high schools. From the testimonials above, many different areas of study can be applied to the garden, such as plant sciences, mathematics, and of course, the garden would be a great tool for sustainability majors hoping to make a change.

### **Benefits**

The above testimonials and Ron Finley's South Los Angeles garden have proven that community gardens are solutions that can work very well in our modern food system. Finley discusses how enthusiastic people were about the community gardens he planned to create in his organization, Green Grounds; "To date, Green Grounds has planted 20 gardens; 50 volunteers have come to their "dig ins." In other words, community gardens have initiated so much interest that people are usually very keen to become volunteers. Finley goes on to discuss how people would actually enjoy eating the food they grew, while it was harder to enjoy or appreciate foods that sitting on a grocery store shelf; "If kids grow kale, they eat kale. If they grow tomatoes, they eat tomatoes. But if they're not shown how food affects the mind and the body, they blindly eat whatever's put in front of them." Campus gardens could have substantial benefits on the community because people are usually more enticed by healthy foods they have grown themselves. Also, with the relatively small amount of campuses willing to construct campus gardens on their grounds, most students would probably be intrigued and impressed by the sustainable measures the university has taken.

## Summary

The benefits and the risks of college campus gardens are important and necessary to assess. Campus gardens encourage social interaction among students and the surrounding community, as much of the produce harvested can be sold or offered to the general public. In this way, campus gardens also contribute to sustainable economic system in which the public is granted access to healthy, fresh food at a fair price, which encourages trade between students and citizens. Campus gardens can also be extremely educational, as various realms of study can be applied to the growth and development of plants, such as: botanical sciences, mathematics, education (eg. how to apply gardens to school curriculum), and sustainability. However, there are risks associated with the construction of campus gardens. One more obvious risk would be a failed harvest, in which any amount of work or effort put forth results in no experience or money gained. Another risk would be little interest or attention given by students or faculty, which would result in scarce amounts of volunteers and harvested produce. However, many things could be done in order to avoid this risk, such as: publicity efforts, garden meetings in which the benefits of the garden are presented to the student body, and community events such as ‘picnics’ where students are invited to taste and share the produce grown on campus. One other possible risk would be inadequate funding, which may be prevented by the possibility of student-led fundraisers. While there is a garden on campus near the Student Housing area, many of its volunteers have admitted that many students are unaware of the garden because it is not located in a centralized area where it can be seen and experienced. Because IU South Bend is a commuter campus, a vast majority of the student body do not even visit Student Housing, which contributes to that garden’s unfortunate inconspicuousness. The most important aspect of campus

gardens is that the benefits are much more than harvested produce; an experience is provided to the students where they can actively participate in a changing food system.

### **Call to Action**

In order to achieve the goal of an on-campus garden, actions must be taken. On a college campus, the best way to achieve a goal is to gain the support of the student body. This can be done with on-campus screenings of Ron Finley's TED Talk, and of discussions among students concerning the benefits of on-campus gardens and how other campuses are benefitting from theirs. The key to this goal is to educate and enlighten a student body who may have never considered sustainability as an issue, and may question how a simple garden could contribute to the overall well-being of the local community. Discussing the issue of an on-campus garden with an Administrative representative is a step that must be taken only *after* an adequate amount of students are interested and concerned with the issue. In this way, there is a greater chance that the students who fought for the on-campus garden will volunteer when it is constructed. Overall, educating the student body is a step that will ensure a likelier chance of achieving our sustainable goal; a campus garden that brings the community, the campus, and the public together.

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