

An Exploratory Case Study of Woolson Street Community Garden

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Introduction

Gardens are as much about the people they bring together as they are about the plants and yield of crops. The concept of community gardens can be traced back centuries and across the globe but has more recently become prevalent in urban areas, such as, Boston and other large metropolitan cities.

Originating in Europe in the 19th century, the concept of community gardens in the US was first seen in inner-city Detroit. (Bowen, 1992) With the goal of addressing urban pressures, the city created vegetable gardens using privately donated land and abandoned municipal spaces. In addition to the economic benefits, the communities saw personal benefits in growing food they could then cook and consume. (Bowen, 1992) Similarly, Philadelphia and New York City have established and developed infrastructure and programming for community gardens (Bowen, 1992).

Literature Review

Motivations for Gardening

Gregory and Leslie (2016) conducted 106 interviews with garden members of 61 urban farms in New York City to evaluate the agroecological and social characteristics of community gardens. They found fresh, organic produce produced not only improved nutrition, but also increased practices of environmental stewardship and improved community relationships throughout the farms. Further, they found there are differing experience levels, incomes, and ethnicities that participate in community gardening in New York City, and unique groups have differing motivations for engaging in community gardening. Gregory and Leslie (2016) also studied low-income gardeners' motivations for being a member and found

gardeners reporting food insecurity or annual household income below \$50,000 per year showed slightly greater reliance on garden produce compared to food-secure and higher-income gardeners. Moreover, the study found that the presence and resources offered by the garden resulted in increased community engagement as well as changes in personal behaviors such as healthier eating (Leslie and Gregory, 2016, p. 8). Specifically, gardeners struggling with food insecurity relied on their gardens for more than two-thirds of their vegetables during the growing season compared to food-secure gardeners, 63% versus 52%, respectively and more than one-third of their vegetables during the winter, 32% versus 11%, respectively. Furthermore, 90% of food-insecure gardeners ranked their garden as their first or second produce source, compared to 72 % of food-secure gardeners (Gregory, 2016). Such evidence illuminates the significant role community gardens play as a source of nutritious food for lower income households.

Anetrella (2016) corroborate the results of the Gregory and Leslie (2016) study. While Anetrella's study differed in a small sample (nine participants) of homeless and low-income gardeners' motivation in Nashville, Tennessee, through a quantitative survey analysis, Anetrella found the primary reason for participating in community gardening programming was to achieve a healthier lifestyle, 56%, respectively. Specifically, the desire for organic food and as a way to exercise were the primary motivators of participating. Social involvement (44%), behind a healthy lifestyle (56%), was the second most reported motivation for participating in the community garden (Anetrella 2016).

In a study that focused on high to middle-class urban gardeners, Gersky (2015) found the primary motivation among gardeners was to contribute to their community and support friends

and family (Gersky 2015). This study had 18 participants and was located in the Lakeville, Michigan community. Further, many of the community gardeners wanted to contribute volunteer hours and to obtain fresh food. Gersky found participants "...saw the food as a nice benefit, [but] it quickly became clear that the garden was not viewed as a viable food source to this community (34)," suggesting the community building and volunteering opportunities were far more important to these communities.

Pro-environmental Behaviors

A key criticism of environmental education is that its information-based model is not a sufficient means in cultivating proactive environmental action or environmentally responsible behavior. Dutta and Chandrasekharan (2018) investigated a community-based approach to farming practices to inquire if it would change an individual's ability and motivation to engage in environmental-based activity. They explored the relationship between farming actions and the motivation of volunteers working in an urban community farm and discovered involvement in a community garden gives participants a purpose and surrounds them with like-minded individuals who encourage interest in farming and the environment. Using qualitative techniques, Dutta and Chandrasekharan followed an interpretive framework and collected 60 hours of farming observations and over seven hours of interviews with five regular community gardeners in Mumbai to understand the motivation of individuals to pursue environmental action, beyond the community garden. Their findings suggest gardening practices and social support from other community members lead to transformative experiences changing values and engagement in environment-related actions. The initiatives focused on local, participative environmental actions

that resulted in personal transformations as the participant gained understanding of farming practices that lead to wider environmental issues such as food miles, seed sovereignty, water usage, and increasing local biodiversity. (Dutta, 2018)

Correa (2013) asked the question, does community gardening increase pro-environmental behavior in conjunction with civic leadership? Measuring the potential synergies between ecological literacy, social health, and civic leadership, Correa interviewed 60 gardeners in Hawai'i over a year in one, vibrant, middle-class community garden and found four themes in establishing and sustaining the community garden: social capital such as increased capability through relationship formation, civic leadership in solving pressing societal needs and issues, ecoliteracy as using their knowledge to create sustainable human communities, and holistic sustainability. Such themes interconnected, Correa contended, as individuals were more motivated to be engaged in the community garden after learning more about ecosystem services, felt more compelled to be engaged as their work made them civic leaders, and felt their communities were more robust, empowered, and sustainable through their civic action and volunteerism. Overall, these key areas supported one another. Holistic sustainability in an urban garden requires the combination of *both* civic participation and ecological knowledge (Carrea 2013, 41).

In summation, the literature we will use in companion with our case study on Woolson community garden will include studies on the motivations and the factors that contribute to sustained participation in community gardens. Our project draws on Gregory and Leslie's (2016) work with community gardens in low-income neighborhoods. Furthermore, similar to the Gersky (2015) study, which focuses on community service and duty, our study draws a

significant focus on the role of the garden as a community ‘center’ both in the ways the participants support the longevity and success of the garden, and also the benefits of the garden to the local community. With improving gardeners’ knowledge of methods of sustainable food production, Gregory and Leslie contend greater yields can be experienced during farming. Indeed, one of the main challenges in maintaining an urban farm is lack of education. Gregory and Leslie recommend that garden educators: 1) incorporate ecological concepts in educational programming, 2) provide follow-up support as gardeners implement, monitor, refine, and share new practices; 3) enhance the accessibility of gardening education (Gregory and Leslie 2016). Our study draws on this as we looked to support the community by sharing our knowledge of gardening and also providing an informational handout to support the gardeners efforts in winter gardening.

Background

The Woolson community garden is 300 squared feet and only in its fourth year of action, the opportunity for growth of the garden and involvement with the community is endless. Many cities across the country have seen community gardens develop programs with the local youth and families as well as involvement with food donation centers creating opportunities for exposure to the food and agriculture sector (Kearney, 2009). Many community gardens that once began from vacant lots or tragedies, as did Woolson’s, have developed into valuable community assets (Kearney, 2009).

This research project seeks to explore the Woolson Community Garden, located in Mattapan, as an exploratory case study. Both from a success perspective for the garden, but also the interaction and involvement of community members and the relationships and skills that

result from the garden as a pillar of their community. Our research seeks to answer, Woolson community members' motivation to be engaged in the garden and in pro-environmental behaviors? And what are the factors that influence the longevity of a community garden in a low-income community?

Method

The following exploratory case study on Woolson Street Community Garden in the neighborhood of Mattapan in the city of Boston, Massachusetts is an investigation into the implementation of a community garden in a low income community and how it can be sustained over time. This will be to conduct a thorough content analysis of the condition and state of the community garden concluding with a narrative of the garden and its community.¹

The goal is to compile five to ten in depth formal interviews of the garden's participants. These interviews will be conducted using our interviews (see Appendix I for the instrument) as well as any additional comments, concerns, or information regarding the garden and its operation. In addition to these in-person and virtual interviews, we used participant observation in meetings and add here other venues you collected your field notes. The goal of this case study is to gather as much information about this garden and its participants so, any information is vital toward painting a more accurate picture of the narrative of the garden. Interviews will be conducted of residents that live in the direct vicinity of the garden. These participants will be found by knocking on the doors of the neighborhood on Woolson Street itself, as well as, the two

¹ Zinschlag, Bryan James. "Cultivating Common Ground? A Case Study of a Community Garden Organization in Northeast Portland, Oregon." Order No. 1561235 Portland State University, 2014. Ann Arbor: *ProQuest*. Web. 7 Dec. 2018.

streets in direct proximity to the garden. Additionally, interviews will be gathered through local residents present at the community meetings we observe.

In completing an exploratory case study into the Woolson Street Community Garden, a content analysis method will be used to draw conclusions from our wide scope of data sources, including: emails, interviews, participant observations at town meeting and in the garden, and backdated data. We hope to use this method, and our wide range of data, to build a deep understanding Woolson Street Community Garden's role in connecting the surrounding community. We are using our interviews and participant observations to learn about the history of the garden; how it came about, how it has been utilized since its inception, and how it continues to play a role in the community and looking to the future.

Due to the nature of our data collection, heavily relying on participant observations, our discussion will include an interpretative approach as we form a holistic narrative about the Woolson Street Community Garden based on an amalgamation of our data. (Berg, 2004) As we collect data from the members of the community the analysis method can be described as using a social anthropological approach as the perspective of our data comes from within the community. (Berg, 2004) After collecting our data we will organize it within three main themes found to establish grounded categories for discussion.

Our data includes a range of participant observation field notes and interviews. With one in-person interview completed and one virtual one we supplemented our data with participant observations. These field notes have been accumulated from the time volunteering in the garden, attending community meetings and events and other communications and interactions with the community.

Results

Over the course of four months, three distinct details related to the operations of the garden manifest themselves in our observations. Most importantly among them is the level of dedication and passion of those in-charge of the garden and how little those qualities matter to the overall success of the garden. This detail is dependent upon the other two results uncovered through this study. The first of these being that due to the limited number of plots available to a vast number of community members, the garden serves primarily as a spot of community gathering and togetherness. This can be understood by one interviewee who commented, “I like to bring my family” to the garden’s events. The garden is the center for community gatherings within its small, five to six block, neighborhood. Harvest and spring cleaning festivals go hand in hand with gardening classes that offer tips and tricks. These events see high rates of attendance, specifically from families with young children. In addition, our interviews revealed that several community members believe mental health is one of the primary goals for engaging in the garden itself. Unfortunately however, the garden is limited by its space land area and, as a result, the success for the garden is defined by its two functions. This is the third, and final, detail. While the garden functions as a community gathering place that unites and builds positive energy that creates inertia and interest in the garden, it can only be properly utilized when the garden itself is continuously maintained and operated. Therefore, the garden is dependent on the participation of its plot owners whose status remains fixed, with little to no turnover for each individual plot. This means that while the garden serves as a source of community engagement, only a few members of that community actively maintain it. Thus the two functions of the

garden: a source of community gathering and a place for a select few to enjoy the pleasures of gardening in the city.

Discussion

First and foremost, the need for a place to enable the establishment of community and togetherness within these five to six Boston City blocks cannot be understated. It is clear that this community is underserved. In only four months of observation, there were three acts of gun violence in the community resulting in the deaths of four people. One of those people was Eleanor Maloney, a 74-year-old grandmother, an innocent bystander. The need to build up a sense of community to try and remove violence as well as promote positive actions toward improving mental health are the primary concerns of everyone within the Mattapan community. This is why the Woolson Street Garden's primary function is as a center for community engagement. That is what the community needs first and foremost. Understanding the needs of the community in this way, lays bare the pressures put upon those who operate the garden itself. The garden must function not for the sake of the food that is grown, but for the sake of the people that it brings together. However, because only a few are actually tasked with caring and maintaining the garden itself, the pressure to maintain that functionality falls on the few rather than the collective. While this may work in the short-term, the difficulties of everyday life in a low-income community can put a strain on the few who bear that burden. One slip-up or one missed chance can result in setbacks that last for months. If those setbacks pile-up, the opportunity for community engagement decreases rapidly resulting in lost momentum. Momentum is critical for the garden to maintain itself, specifically when that maintenance is dependent on so few. Without momentum, interest in the garden may wane overtime and with

that can disappear the generalized sense of need for this particular plot of land. Questions will be asked why a garden instead of a park or a community center. An active plot of land is better than an inactive plot of land.

So, the question must be asked, is a community garden the best use of this plot of land? We believe it is. Let us attempt to understand the value that can be derived from this plot of land for the purposes of creating a strong argument for a community garden. The primary function of this land is to bring community engagement and improve the general health, specifically the mental health, of its residents. A recreational center may bring the community together with sports and recreation as an outlet. It can also be used as a location for special events and holiday gatherings. However, the size of the plot is a limiting factor that makes the construction of such a center infeasible. In contrast, a community garden can bring the community together as a gathering place for events and holiday celebrations in the same way a recreational center can. In addition, a community garden can, through these events, offer a recreational outlet for young and old in the community. It is clear then that a community garden, when maximized to its full potential, is the perfect choice for this Mattapan community.

Reaching full potential is a difficult thing to achieve for any community garden, and even more so for the underserved Woolson community. There are two key components of maximum potentiality that must be incorporated in order for the garden to see maximum success. First and foremost is year long activity in and around the garden. This is essential to maintaining momentum for the garden. Stagnation even for a short period during the winter months can result in removed inertia in relation to community interest and excitement for the garden and that energy must be built back up again, sourced directly from those that are intimately involved in

the garden. Instead, remove the need to rebuild inertia by maintaining momentum in the garden all year long. The biggest obstacle to year-long operation of the community garden is, of course, the winter months. The cold winter of New England is an obstacle not just because the harsh climate makes it difficult to grow anything, but also because it is difficult to get anyone out of their house to farm when it's so cold outside. However, operational does not beget actual action for a garden. Our literature has shown that there are clear benefits to knowing there is an active community garden within one's neighborhood, even if they are not directly involved in it. It only makes sense to capitalize on those benefits during a period of stagnation for the garden. Then there is the question of what to do with the garden while plants are growing. At the surface this may seem like a period of inactivity, but while plants are sprouting, the soil and its biome must be handled properly. High levels of human energy must be sourced to ensure during periods of growth that weeds and pests are properly managed. Holistic sustainable weed and pest management practices require specialization and unique skills that can only be taught through programs. Increasing the number of these programs and incorporating hands on learning techniques will ensure that even during periods of waiting, the community will still be organically engaged with the garden.

The second necessity for garden operations to reach their full potential is the incorporation of rotating plot owners. As always, stagnation is the community garden's biggest weakness. While removing seasonal stagnation will see marked improvements in perception and participation in the garden, that participation will always be capped if the same people are growing in the plots season in and season out. To be fair, there will always be varying degrees of engagement in regards to the operation of a specific garden plot. For some, interest is merely

sparked by the new and exciting and, when faced with the brutal reality of what it means to garden, that enthusiasm quickly wanes. In contrast, some interest will come from veteran planters who are eager to care for his or her own plot of land. Under ideal conditions, the plots would be given to those veteran farmers who could maximize the growing potential of the garden. However, restricting the autonomy of the garden to only a select few means cutting off the majority of the community from the variety of benefits of the garden. Each spring, the garden has a clean-up and planting event that also includes a raffle draw for plot ownership for the upcoming year. While the selection is random and anyone who wishes to have a spot may enter the drawing, participation is still capped at one owner per plot per year. Instead, a multi-owner system that sees the responsibility of each plot change hands over the course of the year could greatly improve the number of garden participants. The more who can actively participate, the more members of the community will have stake in the success of the garden itself. This strategy, coupled with the specialized full-year crop rotation and improved gardening education mentioned previously, would see increased opportunities for community members to engage directly with the cultivation of the garden. Increased opportunities would remove barriers to entry encouraging community members to discover the health benefits of the garden that garden administrators advertise.

Conclusion

The primary goal of the Woolson Community Garden is to serve as an object of community unification. Acts of violence and drug use near and around this previously empty lot encouraged the local community leaders to transform a place of pain and death into a place for positive community engagement. While improving food security is an added benefit of a

community garden, ultimately what will ensure the success of this small plot of land will be the how it brings people together to create a sense of prosperity and wellbeing for a predominantly underserved community. In order for the garden to achieve this, it must maximize community engagement. This means that there must be sustained functionality in order for the garden to maintain its presence. Sustained functionality will come in two ways. One, by increasing the use of the garden beyond a standard gardening season and two, by increasing the number of people who have direct access. Through these two changes, the garden will see a marked increase in its presence within the community. Administrators will find the pressure of maintaining momentum relieved, which, in turn, will free those administrators to pursue other avenues of growth for the garden. Ultimately the purpose of these changes is to create a natural energy around the garden. Those in the community will find an outlet for their excitement and consistent rotation will mean that if one members excitement wanes then another will step in to ensure sustained success and prosperity for the garden. And hopefully, success and prosperity for the garden will be success and prosperity for the Woolson community.

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February 2014.

Appendix I: Consent form and INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Person Number: _____

Years with Garden: _____

You have been selected to help with an important research project. The purpose of this research is to evaluate the motivation for using the Woolson Community Garden and its importance to the community. We request your participation for 20-45 minutes of your time to complete an interview regarding your participation in the Woolson Community Garden.

Participation in this research is voluntary and unpaid. You may choose not to answer specific questions or may discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Your responses will remain completely confidential. There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study.

If you have concerns or questions about this study, please contact the researcher Jennifer Kelly, McGuinn Hall, jennifer.kelly.3@bc.edu and 617-552-4131. If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, you may contact Boston College.

Introductory Questions²

² Annatrella 2016.

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself?
2. Where are you from?
3. Do you have family here?

Gardening Background³

1. How long have you participated at Woolson Community Garden?
2. Did you have previous gardening experience? If yes, please briefly describe the experience.
3. Can you give me a few reasons as to why you choose to participate at this community garden?
4. How did you find out about this community garden?
5. How often do you work in the garden?

Motivation⁴

1. What motivates you to participate at this garden?
 - a. What originally motivated you to participate at this garden?
 - b. Why do you continue to participate at this garden?
2. What barriers prevent you from participating more with this garden?
 - a. What barriers do you see as potentially impacting others from participating?
3. Could you imagine yourself being more involved in the garden?
 - a. What would need to be in place to make this happen?
4. What changes could be made to this garden to help it better serve the community?

³ Ibid.

⁴ Howard 2013.

5. Do you have any additional comments about your experiences with volunteering with this community garden or about this garden in general?

Lifestyle⁵

1. What do you do with the harvested vegetables and fruits? Provide an estimate of produce harvested each week during the season? Eaten?
2. Did you eat a lot of fresh produce before working in the garden? Where did you get your produce?
3. How often do you eat what you grow?

Community Building⁶

1. How well do you feel Woolson Community Garden connects and empowers the community? Please give examples.
2. Why is it important to teach the community about gardening and food?

Demographic Information (Please be reminded, this information is confidential.)

1. Age: _____
2. Race: _____
3. Zip code: _____
4. Marital status: _____
5. Typical income level over the past 12 months (check one)

⁵ Gregory and Leslie 2016.

⁶ Correa 2013.

_____ Less than \$25,000 _____ \$25,000 to \$34,999 _____ \$35,000 to \$49,999.
_____ \$50,000 to \$74,999 _____ \$75,000 to \$99,999 _____ \$100,000 to \$149,999.
_____ \$150,000 to \$199,999. _____ \$200,000 or more.