

Cultivating Strategic Partnerships in Garden-Based Learning

Executive Summary

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Matthew Waldman

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The purpose of *Cultivating Strategic Partnerships in Garden-Based Learning* was to help the Farm at South Mountain initiate educational partnerships with non-profit organizations, university entities, and local elementary schools. The primary clients in this project were the Farm at South Mountain and Martin Luther King Jr. Early Childhood Center. However, this project also entailed helping with the coordination and planning of a networking and workshop event on Arizona Gardens and Sustainability with the Sustainability Teacher's Academy at the Farm at South Mountain. The work provided in this project helped the Farm establish and refine the scope of their new community outreach arm Gather and Grow. The educational outreach and urban agriculture services provided by Gather and Grow aims to show a modern approach to farming to create scalable food options for families who live in the adjacent food desert. As a result, this culminating experience project aimed to tackle the sustainability problem associated with food insecurity in South Mountain Village due to the inadequate access to healthy, fresh and affordable food options. Food deserts have a low density of supermarkets and are underserved from a nutritional aspect due to the high density of fast-food restaurants and convenience stores.

Individuals within food deserts are vulnerable to asthma, obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, malnutrition, and other dietary-related illnesses. The complex challenges of childhood obesity and hunger are national and international public health crises with dispersed impacts that span in physical, psychological, and social dimensions. The intervention points out that the client and the project identified were to provide experiential educational opportunities to help build the capacity of students, teachers and community members to engage in garden-based learning. The desired outcomes from this project were to leverage the existing research and developments associated with educational gardens and urban farms in Phoenix as an asset for master gardeners and other professionals to collaborate and teach children and families concepts in sustainability and gardening through an applied experience. The long-term goal for the future state of the educational garden at Martin Luther King Jr. Early Childhood Center is to integrate additional learning concepts in finance, nutrition, and cooking to help the community members that are affected by food insecurity in South Mountain Village.

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The methods and tools used in order to identify a baseline for Martin Luther King Jr. Early Childhood Center's garden integration status was performed through the usage of the Garden, Resources, Education and Environmental Nexus (GREEN) Tool for strengthening existing school gardens. The GREEN Tool assesses a garden's progress to achieving the 18 components through its performance on a self-reported scorecard that is measured on a three-point scale. The components are placed into three separate domain categories garden logistics, student experience, and school culture. Additional insights for this project were derived from conducting a series of interviews and garden visitations with garden educators, volunteers, master gardeners, and additional stakeholders in Arizona who operate in the organization and integration of school gardens. The method of asset-based community development was also employed as an intervention to create strategic partnerships that were focused on building the capacity for the community's existing assets. In underserved communities, schools and institutions are invaluable assets that can be used to build alliances to create healthy school systems which turn reinforce the overall health of communities. Strong and strategic alliances can be developed in communities through the discovery of shared values and interests between school systems and community development leaders. The previous baselines for measuring the garden's success from the Principal of Martin Luther King Early Jr. Childhood Center depended on how well the garden-based learning applied to curriculum standards.

The results of this project were derived from the garden integration score that was measured via the GREEN Tool matrix. The final integration score for Martin Luther King Jr. Early Childhood Center was based upon the summation of the domain scores in the matrix. The GREEN Tool defines minimally integrated as ones that receive a total score of 0 to 19, moderately integrated gardens as 20 to 38, and well-integrated gardens receive a score of 38 to 57. The results of Martin Luther King Jr. Early Childhood Center received a score of 25 which translates to the school's garden to have a moderate integration status. An asset-based community development map was also produced for this project for Martin Luther King Jr. Early Childhood Center and the Farm at South Mountain in order to visualize the current assets associated with the project clients.

The combined usage of the GREEN Tool matrix and asset-based community development map helped identify the gaps and strengths of the current resources existing at Martin Luther King Jr. Early Childhood Center as well as the potential partnerships that the Farm at South Mountain could help facilitate with the elementary school. The overall sustainability and functioning of the garden at Martin Luther King Jr. Early Childhood center will benefit from engaging with more local organizations involved in garden-based agriculture as it would create a more robust network of stakeholders working on this project. However, one of the primary struggles faced by the elementary school was the introduction of a new Principal during a time of budget cuts and garden stagnation, and the current garden manager from the U of A Maricopa County Cooperative Extension at the school had an advantageous goal for the garden that did not align with the clients shared vision. As a project manager, I had to serve as a mediator in order to bridge the communication gaps between the parties involved.

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The project helped resolved the sustainability challenges associated with the school garden by creating a more solidified steering committee surrounding the gardens goals, objectives, and vision of the future developments of the garden space. Additional actions that could be taken by the Martin Luther King Jr. Early Childhood Center to optimize their gardens results would be to find a teacher or group of teachers who are willing to be a part of the Sustainability Teachers' Academy, as they are currently working to develop a task force dedicated to helping school gardens in the Phoenix Metropolitan Area. Additionally, the school should join and review the materials provided by the Edible School Yard Project's online network as they have created valuable content for helping the gardens align with curriculum standards across the nation. The Farm at South Mountain should consider declaring Gather and Grow as a non-profit entity in order to receive donations and compete for grants that would help fund projects similar to their work with Martin Luther King Early Childhood Center. Examples of follow up projects for the involved clients could revolve around taking another assessment of the GREEN Tool after the garden has finished its current developments, finding ways to engage the community and neighborhood more in the school garden, and figuring out how to create a robust network for the School of Sustainability and other schools at Arizona State University to help build the capacity of teachers and students interested in garden-based education.