Unearthing Parkland

A Sustainability Fellowship in Food Justice and the Power of Dirt

Emily Steelquist
Sustainability Fellow 2015-2016
Pacific Lutheran University

Introduction

This Sustainability Fellowship was originally conceived because of an important experience at Keithley Middle School. I feel that the backstory is important to share here because it strongly shaped both my experience as a Sustainability Fellow and how I explained my research to the PLU community in subsequent presentations and conversations.

At 8:00am on a Thursday, I was in a first period 8th grade Social Studies class. I looked across the room, and saw one of the girls in the class was sound asleep on her desk, rather than completing a worksheet with the rest of her class. Her teacher approached and asked: "Have you had anything to eat yet today?" Her response was negative, but she seemed apprehensive to eat in class, as it was against the ordinary class policies. The teacher assured her that it was okay to eat, and that she needed to get something in her stomach to help sustain her for the rest of the day. She proceeded to pull out a packet of uncooked Top Ramen noodles, crush up the package with the small packet of spices, and picked at the crumbs for the rest of the period. I was confused at this, not necessarily because of the content of the food, although it's true that this bag of starch and salt probably wasn't her most nutritious choice. Instead, I wondered: why is this girl hungry, when Keithley Middle School serves both free breakfast and lunch to all of its students? And if this girl, or other students in the school, aren't getting nutritious food during the school year, what will happen to Keithley's food-insecure students when these two free meals cease?

These questions stuck with me, and were ultimately my reason for applying to be a Sustainability Fellow. My original question was simple: what is happening with Food Justice in Parkland, and what can the PLU community do to get involved? The process of uncovering the answer to these questions was less simple, but did take me down a path full of passionate, interesting, grounded people who were more than willing to share their successes, failures, and goals. It was a fascinating summer. I hope that the experiences I had inspire you, the reader, to get involved somehow, too. We can't really solve the problem; there are too many people to feed. But we can work with the wonderful community surrounding the university to make food and distribute it in a way that is more just, equitable, and healthy.

Former Sustainability Fellowship Literature Review

Food Justice

Food Justice, according to Sustainability Fellow Caroline Hylander (2011), is the pursuit of equal access to food across racial, socio-economic, ability, and health lines. Equal access to food is hindered by many factors, including but not limited to: access to transportation to grocery stores, whether nearby grocery stores accept food stamps, what types of nearby stores do accept food stamps, having money to buy nutritious vs. non-nutritious food, having time to cook, or whether or not their family will eat "healthy" food. Food Justice assesses the health of our national and global food system, with the intent to supply more consistent, sustainable, healthy food sources to a greater proportion of the population.

Parkland Washington, the community immediately surrounding Pacific Lutheran University, has an estimated poverty rate of 19.2% (Hylander 2011), which is higher than that

for the rest of Pierce County. There are also relatively high levels of residents with no Bachelor's degrees, and a high level of racial diversity. Further, only nine of the closest SNAP retailers (stores which accept food stamps) are grocery stores or discount retailers. The remaining sixteen retailers are convenience stores, drug stores, or fall into some "other" category. All of these factors directly contribute to a food access problem.

The PLU Community Garden

In 2006, Sustainability Fellow Kate Fontana presented a practical report for the improvement of the current garden at PLU. The creation of the paid garden coordinator positions is the direct result of her work, as well as many of the current gardening practices she recommends. Her in-depth study, while not fully summarized here, serves as a helpful framework for how the garden is able to function best based on coordination with the campus community and use of local natural resources. She fully documented the person-hours donated to the garden over the course of one year, and the total productivity of the garden as a result. Her findings support the idea that the garden is a high-need organization in order to be truly successful, and this work ideally would not be done by volunteer labor alone. This context framed my view of the garden based on the complexity of its needs, and its original purpose and mission as a source of food for the Parkland community.

Methods

The research method for this exploration relied primarily on informal interviews and participant observation in selected projects. Interviewees were selected based on knowledge of available food justice resources in relation to their profession or volunteer work. Most interviewees had direct ties to local farms, gardens, or non-profit organizations that supply food security resources to impoverished families and individuals. Participant observation is a common research method in qualitative research that involves immersing oneself in the subject of study.

Interview questions aimed to establish an overview of the garden/organization's leadership structure, funding, volunteer support, impact on the community, distribution of food, challenges faced, and other logistics. Most were conducted at the site of the organization itself, often while touring the space to better understand the physical layout and size needed to support each organization's efforts. One interview was conducted over the phone, and some individual follow-up questions were asked via email.

Participant observation was focused on three volunteer sites: the PLU Community Garden, Trinity Lutheran Garden of Edible Grace, and L'Arche Tahoma Hope Farm and Gardens. The two former sites were visited once per week, for approximately two hours of volunteering at any given visit. L'Arche was visited twice during the summer.

Work at the Trinity garden involved some weeding, seeding, and transplanting, but more often harvesting and washing food, which was then given directly to the Trinity Food Pantry. This was done with the help of another community volunteer at the beginning of the summer, and then alone for the remaining summer months.

Work at the PLU garden usually involved weeding garden beds, and occasionally harvesting and washing for the Food Pantry. During this time, I also conducted informal

interviews with the two student Garden Managers, to better understand the daily challenges they face as a part of the garden and their vision for the garden in the future.

Finally, work at L'Arche farm occurred twice during the summer. L'Arche regularly accommodates volunteers, who will work alongside Core Members (residents of L'Arche farm with developmental disabilities) and farm staff on various projects throughout the summer. There are also tours of the farm, given to each new volunteer crew, in order to orient newcomers to the scope of the farm and the various products it produces.

The research of this project was a labor of love. Every time I visited a new site or met with a new organization representative, I was blown away by the passion they infused into their work. Each person believed in the power of hard work, community support, and the good that could be done when food was grown without chemicals and with much hard labor in local soil. Many worked directly with the recipients of their food, and learned the importance of cross-cultural cooperation, equal voicing of opinion, and the necessity of organizational change and the growing pains that accompany it. We had conversations about the changing world and the place of food in corporate structure, which brought to light some very difficult questions that will need to be answered by society--hopefully, sooner rather than later. It was a summer-long process of meeting a diverse array of people who all had their hands in the same field, so to speak, and had all created meaningful change in their communities in some form or another. And with this research, I could discover how PLU could enhance its own community engagement with its currently available resources.

Findings

See Appendix A for a summary of interviews and participant observation experiences.

Best Practices for Gardening

The Harvest Pierce County approach to learning is more one of spreading knowledge than of teaching the "right" way to garden, which I think should strongly apply to the results of this study. There is no single correct way to manage a garden and grow food, as seen in the diversity of gardens within a few mile radius of PLU.

The great Northwest is a bountiful area for growing simple, low-maintenance, easily harvestable produce. Some of the most common food we found other gardens growing in the Tacoma area were:

Tomatoes
Beans (bush and pole varieties)
Kale
Lettuce
Radishes
Carrots
Squash and zucchini
Cucumbers
Basil
Rosemary
Swiss chard

Collards
Potatoes

In terms of basic maintenance, each of these vegetables is fairly straightforward to plant, grow, and harvest. The use of a greenhouse to provide early-season starts is generally advisable, if available, although most of these can also be grown from seeds. Of course, all of these plants will do much better if given soil that has been properly prepared and is relatively weed-free. The most functional gardens had easily weed-able soil, or made use of plants that inherently prevent weeds, such as squash and zucchini. Because these gardens required less weeding time, they were more likely to have interested volunteers that came back consistently, who had time to be part of the sowing and harvesting process.

One of the challenges for gardens that hope to contribute to their communities lies in deciding what food will actually be most useful for the people who need it, while balancing volunteer satisfaction at the prospect of gardening something new and exciting. Food pantries need food that their clients will actually eat, which are not always the most exciting things to be growing in the garden. Workers at the Trinity Lutheran Food Pantry noted that the foods that go the fastest are the absolute staples: tomatoes, lettuce, beans, etc. More adventurous-looking foods (such as kohlrabi, purple potatoes, and any non-traditional-looking vegetables) were taken less often by clients. Mostly, clients questioned how to cook the different vegetables, and what they tasted like. This problem is already being addressed by some other programs at Trinity, which provide new recipes and general cooking know-how to the community, mainly in the form of free workshops and the distribution of various resources at the monthly Community Meals. To do this, Trinity partners with the Center for Canning Arts and the WSU extension program coordinator.

Physically, gardens need to be organized and visually appealing for best volunteer response, and for the sake of the sanity of garden managers (advice from Micaela Cooley of Harvest Pierce County). Older gardens that had unused structures, weedy garden beds, and rusty equipment posed barriers not just to the success of the garden's produce, but also to potential community and volunteer outreach opportunities. Volunteers and community members, and people in general, want to be proud of a space that they have taken ownership of. Taking ownership over an unwieldy garden doesn't generally instill the pride that should come with growing food from the earth, and makes it difficult to attract new volunteers; many people are not looking for a rehabilitation project, but to be a part of a successful, fun, and meaningful experience. It can't be stressed enough: volunteers need good organization, and this often comes in the form of having good basic garden structures.

Some of the most successful gardens had large, sturdy garden beds, raised a foot or more off of the ground, and made with thick wooden support that can stand the test of time. This is especially important when considering accessibility of the garden for less-able volunteers. Hoop houses that were created by semi-professional labor (either by experienced community members who happened to be construction workers, or with the help of an engineering class at a university) looked much better and were much more useful than haphazard hoop houses that could easily fall apart and were difficult to work around. Of course, these structures also help the plants themselves grow better, which contributes to a more successful garden and a better overall volunteer experience. Many gardens did not possess compost bin structures, but they all required a good system of compost management in order to create useful compost and not

attract harmful pests. Compost bins that did exist in structural form needed to be strong and thick, able to last for years full of decomposing matter. If not, the garden needed to have a long-term plan to fix up the bins from time to time, and have the expertise and labor to do so consistently.

Volunteers, as it has already been suggested, are truly the backbone of garden labor. Even gardens and farms with a few paid overseers could not have functioned on paid labor alone. Volunteers need consistent support from and communication with the managers of the garden. Lack of communication, especially for new volunteers, can create some easily avoidable inconsistencies. If that volunteer is inexperienced in gardening and unsupervised, they may be hesitant to make decisions that help the garden run smoothly, such as failing to harvest an average-sized zucchini and allowing it to grow monstrously too large. Simple systems, such as a volunteer communication board or a running email thread, helped volunteers know the state of the garden and feel useful, even if volunteers and managers can't be in the physical garden space together at the same time.

A significant amount of time also needs to be paid to volunteer outreach and coordination by the garden managers. This can be especially difficult if the organization of the garden itself is poor. For example, if there are too many garden-related physical tasks that need to be completed, volunteer coordination time will be neglected. It seems to form a negative feedback system: fewer volunteers are coordinated, so the garden falls further into disrepair, allowing less time for managers to coordinate volunteers, etc. A serious revamp is needed to reset the garden and reorganize time commitments to various management tasks. This revamp might be in the form of an ultra-productive, one-time work party, or a sudden influx of extra funding, or even just a few committed volunteers who can donate extra time to get the garden back on its feet. This allows garden coordinators to take control over administrative tasks, and let the actual gardening sit in the hands of the willing, well-coordinated volunteers.

Current State of the PLU Community Garden

The PLU garden acquired two new garden managers in March of 2015, both of whom planned to stay on as managers for at least two full years. The history of the garden includes varying amounts of productivity, based on the commitment of student staff and Garden Club volunteer work parties. This summer has been fairly productive due to the hard work of both garden coordinators. However, a low level of volunteer investment and long list of varying maintenance tasks take away from the food production of the garden, as recognized by the garden coordinators.

It should be noted that this garden is not a typical "Community Garden," be definition. Half of the garden has beds can be owned and operated by community members, free of charge. They have access to tools provided by the garden managers, but are not harvested for the Trinity Food Pantry; rather, the owners sow and reap their own food. The remaining half of the garden beds are operated by the garden managers and PLU students for direct donation to the Trinity Food Pantry. Most gardens choose one or the other of these strategies, rather than having space for both. This splits the garden managers' time and attention between working on their own garden projects, and managing and assisting the garden bed owners.

The garden managers made regular (roughly weekly) trips to the Trinity Lutheran Food pantry to donate lettuce, tomatoes, radishes, chard, broccoli, and other vegetables. The garden

also underwent some significant structural and aesthetic changes this summer, including: all new wood chips put down on top of what used to be grass; creation of two free-form dirt raised beds; and excavation of a section in the back of the garden for a new in-ground greenhouse.

These slow changes and hours of hard work have contributed to a garden that is, overall, more manageable than it has been in the past. However, the managers do recognize that increased volunteer assistance and funding for more staff would significantly benefit the productivity of the garden.

Best Practices for School Programs

School programs examined in this study, due to its timeline, were only directly observed in their summer formats. However, most gardens that had summer programs also continue into academic-year after school programs, which (weather permitting) follow similar formats.

School gardening programs, regardless of the ages of the students involved, need to be fun. Gardening is an empowering experience for many adults, but can easily grow monotonous for younger gardeners. Some of the best advice gleaned from school programs is to make use of silly chants, cheers, and other energizing activities to help kids maintain focus. Developing a program-specific song or end-of-the-day cheer was a common event for most programs, providing a sense of unity to the group. One outstanding practice by Green Thumbs was the use of a simple set of good-morning stretches that helped remind the students about basic gardening practices. The four things that plants need are air, water, light, and earth, each of which involved a simple stretch and a reminder about how to be good to plants (not stepping in the garden beds, remembering to water them, giving them good soil, etc.). Fun activities, including games, puzzles, songs, and crafts, were also regularly rotated into garden time. The addition of these activities helped kids stay focused and prevent misbehavior from boredom with any particular task.

As with any garden volunteers, students in a garden program should feel a sense of ownership over the space in which they work. This space should not be one that is commanded by the program managers and merely visited by the kids. Growing food is most impactful for young people when they invest in the garden, help plants grow, harvest the fruits of their labor and celebrate the process together. Constant reminders about the codependent relationship between humans and food (specifically, these students and the plants they care for) can help kids remember the tangible impact of their work. Having age-appropriate conversations about garden planning and future projects helps kids see how they can have a significant impact on the world around them, giving them a sense of pride in a beautiful space. Murals and painted stones were a consistent source of garden art that could be done by the students themselves, and are also easy ways to break up the monotony of a day in the garden. Giving students ample space to personalize their surroundings, while also participating in community discussions and collective action, gives kids individual and group identity in the garden space.

Another outstanding example of integrating schools and gardens was found in GRuB, a program in Olympia, Washington that works with high school students. Through the GRuB farm, students were given school credit (September-May) or a monetary stipend (June-August) in return for their work. The GRuB staff testified to the success of this approach, stressing that many students who came to work at the farm were non-traditional learners or “unsuccessful” in school, but found fulfillment and social/emotional growth within the context of the program.

Students worked hard to grow and sell the food they grew, and gained skills in teamwork, responsibility, and marketing.

Any PLU student who hopes to reach out to the community would have to extend themselves beyond the realm of the PLU "bubble." Most students who come to PLU are not from Tacoma, and would thus be engaging in a community to which they don't originally belong. Many college students who would hope to engage with a school program might struggle with feeling like an outsider, trying to be a part of the lives of the participating students while not fully understanding their background and social context. The school programs that I studied often combatted this by age-appropriately addressing inequality and social justice issues. This usually involved workshops for the gardening staff and intentional dialogue about how to best support the students in the program. Further, kids were invited to join in the dialogue by talking about differences and similarities between the people in their group, and celebrating these differences by participating in collaborative activities, such as painting a mural on the side of a garden shed.

School outcomes for the students involved in these programs are comprehensive and long-studied, usually collected and distributed for the purposes of continuing grant requirements. GRuB in Olympia, especially, has reported amazing changes in school and social behavior in participating students, including increased self confidence (70%), leadership skills (77%), and movement toward educational and career goals (95%), and GPA (from 1.81 to 2.77) (GRuB Impact Report 2013). Giving students ownership over a space gives a sense of purpose that traditional learning environments do not provide for many young people. Further, the science and social studies that can be integrated into a garden learning environment give real, practical knowledge to students, which can be tied back into traditional classroom learning environments. Overall, the benefits of gardening provided to young people are numerous and powerful, and depend on the thoughtful planning of the facilitators as well as the gifts of the community itself.

Current State of Edible Landscaping

Edible landscaping provides a beautiful way for ordinary campus space to become productive and delicious. PLU has an abundance of natural resources that are already present and document by Facilities (See Appendix B).

All around campus, there are edible fruit trees and bushes that go largely unnoticed by the student population. Currently, there are several plum trees, cherry trees, Chinese dogwood trees, and huckleberry bushes scattered across upper and lower campus. The former golf course is home to a small orchard of young apple trees, and a patch of ground near the Facilities office is home to blueberries, gooseberries, raspberries, strawberries, a pear tree, and another Chinese dogwood tree.

Because the productive season for fruit trees is during the summer when most PLU students are absent, making use of the food produced can be somewhat tricky. The cherry trees have a relatively early season, with fruit going bad on the tree by July. Cherries had either been eaten by birds or shriveled on the plant by the time I became aware of them. Plum trees have a season that lasts slightly longer, although relatively few plums were ever harvested; most fell to the ground by mid to late July. The berries on lower campus were harvested more than any other plant, due to their close proximity to the Facilities office, where student workers and staff would eat them occasionally for a snack. The apple trees on the golf course were still quite

young, and only had a few small apples to bear; not enough to be productively harvested or large enough to be eaten. The huckleberry bushes on lower campus did not receive enough water this year to bear a significant number of berries, and while the upper campus berries were somewhat productive, there were still relatively few to harvest.

At present, no relationship exists between PLU and the Harvest Pierce County Gleaning Project, which works to reclaim un-harvested food from individuals and farms. However, a partnership could certainly be established if the on-campus trees are registered within the Gleaning network. The Gleaning project requires a release form from all volunteers, which would allow volunteers to harvest food on campus without holding PLU liable for accidents. The PLU Facilities department (specifically, Ken Cote) is open to this idea; see Discussion for further details.

Food Reclamation

PLU has the benefit of having a great deal of control over dining services because it owns and operates its own private food production system, rather than outsourcing to a private company. This system allows dining employees to take advantage of several food reclamation opportunities.

Uneaten food that has been made by dining services but not yet put out for general consumption is donated to one of several local establishments, including the Tacoma Rescue Mission, Parkland First Baptist Church, and Trinity Lutheran Church Food Pantry. Food that is about to expire, such as sandwiches from Old Main Market, has also been donated in the past. Wendy Robins, Operations Manager of the AUC Commons, is often the coordinator of these efforts. According to Wendy, food is usually dropped off every couple of weeks by a staff member in Old Main Market. Wendy weighs the food she donates, but sometimes food that is donated goes un-weighed if she is on vacation.

Another model for food reclamation was investigated at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. Sustainable Foods Educator Maren Beard overseas a student-run program which packages and transports uneaten food from dining to local food banks. The program pays four student workers to train and oversee volunteers at two packing shifts per week. Funding comes from the university Sustainability department and a local energy grant, and about 1000 pounds of food per month are donated. See Appendix C for more examples of University Food Reclamation models.

Discussion

Every university faces challenges in the process of increasing collaboration with the surrounding community, and opportunities for improvement are truly endless. Competing pressures to take advantage of the opportunities can be both overwhelming and full of practical hope. Below are some simple steps PLU can take to be a better community partner in terms of food justice and nutrition in Parkland, along with the practical aspects of implementing or augmenting programming for each opportunity.

General PLU Community Garden Practices

The PLU Community Garden is a beautiful space, devoted to growing good things in Parkland and donating the fruits of hard labor to the Trinity Food Pantry. It is a long-standing program which shows how the dedication of two paid workers can allow a garden to function for years with the support of the Facilities and Sustainability departments. However, there is much that the garden can stand to learn and improve on. Here are a few recommendations for the PLU Community Garden, based on the best practices of gardens nearby.

The first and most important recommendation for the improvement of the PLU Garden is to provide additional funding to garden staff from the Sustainability or Facilities departments. There is more work to be done at the garden than can be effectively managed by two people. I believe it would be effective to have three paid garden workers: two would manage the garden itself, and one would oversee outreach and volunteer management. This increased organization would hopefully improve involvement in the garden by PLU students, faculty, and staff. At least one of these garden workers should be invited to sit on the Sustainability Committee, in order to facilitate integration with PLU's sustainability goals. The following recommendations will be most effectively implemented if this staffing change is applied first.

PLU's garden is unique in its mix of food-bank and community gardening in a single space. Both community gardening, and gardening with the intent of donating all harvested food, require significant communication and coordination work with community members and volunteers. The PLU garden should consider holding its community garden members more accountable for their plot, as past practices have allowed beds to grow unruly with crops that have gone to seed. One potential solution, adapted from the Lakeview Church of Christ Community Garden, could involve the signing of a contract that indicates the required level of commitment to make use of a garden bed. Other gardens have also incorporated an element of community support by requiring bed tenants to spend a certain number of hours working on the garden as a whole, coordinated by work parties and supervised by garden coordinators. The coordination aspect is essential, since most community garden bed tenants will feel ownership over their own plot of land, but might be hesitant to make significant changes or do significant work on the common spaces of the garden, including tool sheds, greenhouses, pathways, and other structures.

As for the non-community part of the garden, the large space available requires a significant volunteer base on top of the work of the garden coordinators in order to be truly successful. Volunteer coordination is a tricky business, and often takes a great deal of time to truly be effective. As noted above, adding garden staff would alleviate the burden of this time and energy. Making use of the PLU garden club could also be a part of delegating the workload of volunteer coordination. The time is ripe for the garden to become a popular and attractive part of the fabric of PLU, but raising awareness and promoting productivity takes time and persistence. Volunteer coordination is the first and most important part of this process.

It's one thing to attract volunteers, and entirely another to keep them coming back. Volunteers return to a site for many reasons: personal ownership over the space, interest in gardening itself, as a source of community, or for the sense of doing good and being a part of something bigger than oneself. Before a volunteer can feel these things for a garden, the garden needs to inspire respect in them for a job well done. The best way to do this often relies on aesthetics: gardens should be, theoretically, beautiful, organized, and productive, all at the same time. Gardens as volunteer organizations face this issue in a much more poignant way

than some other volunteer opportunities, primarily because gardens are inherently involved in the perpetual fight against weeds, the weather, and the effects of time. The garden managers are currently in the process of establishing a sense of pride in the garden, which hasn't been present for many years. The addition of wood chips to cover the grass and the soon-to-be functional greenhouse, as well as the already functional tool shed and well-constructed raised beds near the front of the garden, are huge strides toward making the garden more volunteer-friendly. Volunteers love a clean, organized space, first and foremost. From that, the productivity of the garden can bloom.

Current and future garden managers should constantly keep in mind the long-term impacts of the plans they make for additions to the garden. Taking the time to build good raised beds, invest in quality tools, take care of the new greenhouse, etc. will truly pay off in coming years. Special attention should be paid to what crops are planted, what crops went to seed in the previous year, and what perennials should be cared for over the long-term. If possible, a written or digital record of these details should be kept, and any turnover in garden management should involve a meeting to discuss past plantings and future plans.

Another avenue for continued garden growth is an effort to continuously involve various on-campus departments in its efforts. Food is common ground, after all; we all need it, and it connects to countless educational pursuits in many ways. Using the garden as a conduit for conversation about the responsibility of PLU to make the best possible use of its natural resources could pave the way for more support from areas of campus which have not previously been involved. Classes that require a service-learning commitment could easily be recruited to help in the garden a few times per semester; this is already occurring through a few campus departments. However, academic projects could also make use of the garden, with potential partnerships with education, kinesiology, biology, or even business students. This would require the garden managers to meet with and coordinate with various faculty members, which would also take up a significant amount of time. The benefits for both the garden and the students, however, could be monumental if allowed to flourish.

Dining services could also stand to benefit from the garden if a better communication system existed, in order to cultivate food that the kitchen employees need. The most productive, easily usable food that the garden could produce for Dining would probably be a selection of herbs, which could include, basil, rosemary, thyme, etc. If Dining services is interested in procuring food from the garden, they should be expected to put effort into it, as well. An ideal model (currently followed by the University of Puget Sound garden) might be for Dining services to buy any seeds or starts that they hope to make use of, which the garden managers could plant, tend, and harvest. This requires communication between the garden managers and upper-level dining employees, who would have to be committed to the project. Ideally, signage about what parts of meals had been grown in the PLU garden could be put up in the Commons, educating students on where their food actually comes from. The trickiest part would probably be in finding the balance between how much food is donated to Trinity Food Pantry, and how much goes to PLU Dining. The garden could make use of available resources and use the money involved in Dining to benefit the overall garden, while still staying true to its original intent to provide fresh food to the food pantry.

While these numerous opportunities for improvement certainly exist, it is important to note that the PLU garden already has a great deal to be proud of. Hopes for the future are

merely improvements and expansions of what already exists because of the hard work of past garden managers and volunteers. With the support of the PLU community, this garden could become an even more productive and beautiful part of the process of improving Food Justice in Parkland.

CHAMPS Green Club

One of the most straightforward ways to engage with the Parkland community through gardening is to work through the currently existing CHAMPS after school program at Keithley Middle School. CHAMPS runs during the Franklin Pierce School District Academic year, from 2:00-5:00 on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays. CHAMPS provides general study time for students, in addition to rotating programs that offer opportunities in technology, language studies, multicultural enrichment, and the arts. Offering a gardening program through CHAMPS would allow Keithley students to explore the PLU Community Garden within the framework of CHAMPS.

There are distinct advantages to partnering with a pre-existing program when trying to engage local youth in gardening. CHAMPS provides a set of familiar expectations for students which define the boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate school behavior. A PLU gardening program could make use of these expectations and rely on Keithley discipline policy in order to limit inappropriate behavior in the garden.

Based on information provided from the gardening programs I interviewed, PLU garden coordinators could develop simple projects and sessions for the students, two afternoons per week. The sessions would be no longer than 60 minutes at a time, lasting from about 2:30-3:30. General recommendations from the interviewed gardens include short rotations for various garden activities, potentially including harvesting, seeding, art projects, simple landscaping tasks, and discussions/information about general gardening practices. Students should be trained in how to safely use and store tools, with firm policies for proper tool use and placement in the garden when not being used. The PLU Garden Coordinators would almost definitely need help from other sources: hopefully, one or two volunteers who could help run the program, mostly for the sake of having another set of eyes on the Middle School students. The program shouldn't have more than a 5:1 ratio of students to adults. This allows easy rotations from one station to another throughout the 60 minute session, with each adult either manning one station, or following a group of students from place to place.

There are some distinct challenges to this model of after school program, however. First, the Garden Coordinators are paid to work in the garden--not to work with kids, or to develop programming for kids. In order to have a functioning program, there would need to be consistent and adequate support from other sources. If this comes from the PLU community, it would have to be paid or volunteer work from a student, faculty, or staff member, hopefully with some sort of background in working with young people and in the garden, as well. There would need to be a strong line of communication between these individuals and the Garden Coordinators, with respect paid to what projects need to be done in the garden that could reasonably be done by middle school students. Support could also come in the form of paid CHAMPS staff. These staff members run some of the other after school enrichment courses, and it is possible that they could help facilitate the running of the garden club. However, there would still need to be

personnel who could plan and implement the programming, which takes more time than the CHAMPS staff could probably devote to it.

Staff would also benefit from visiting existing youth gardening programs, such as GRuB in Olympia or Green Thumbs in Tacoma. GRuB offers professional development workshops that teach how to garden with youth, usually offered in February and May. Garden Coordinators, or other individuals interested in staffing the after school program, could apply for ASPLU appropriations or Green funds to cover the cost of attending. Alternatively, staff could visit other school programs themselves to learn more about their best practices.

There are many benefits that this program would provide to both the involved PLU and Keithley student communities. Getting kids in the garden means helping them be active while they learn about how fresh, healthy food can be easily grown from starts and seeds. There is an alarming and growing disconnect between the farm and the table, especially for low income families and children (The Stop, 2013). Getting kids in the garden shows them how food can be grown, simply and deliciously, with the help of hard work and dedication. It would give the Garden Managers some much-needed labor, as well as professional development in programming and facilitating garden growth with the help of consistent volunteers (in this case, the Keithley students). It would allow young people from the Parkland community to take ownership over a part of PLU's campus, creating a common space that, in the past, has primarily been used only by PLU-affiliated individuals. Challenges would arise, of course. But the chance for PLU and Keithley students to interact in the space of a garden could provide incredible benefits for both sides in tangible and meaningful ways.

Other School Connections

The Trinity Lutheran garden, food pantry, and feeding ministries are the best example of well-organized programming that PLU students can easily participate in. The Center for Community Engagement and Service already has a paid AmeriCorps member filling a Health Parkland Coordinator position. This person works with PLU students and Trinity feeding ministry leadership to coordinate garden work parties, food pantry volunteers, and monthly Community Meal prep, serving, and tear-down workers.

This partnership could be improved by increasing student participation in nutrition education programming at Trinity. Food Pantry volunteers have expressed interest in having volunteers talk to food pantry patrons about the various ways to use unfamiliar foods, or develop and distribute simple, healthy recipes. Demos and tastings are an effective strategy for engaging patrons with unfamiliar healthy foods, and could be developed and run by PLU students. This could be especially effective if it was done in coordination with kinesiology or nutrition classes as a service-learning component to courses.

Another opportunity for PLU student engagement could be the Brookdale school garden, a beautiful space that is currently run by a paid garden manager and used by classes to teach children about growing food. No official connection currently exists between PLU and the Brookdale garden, although the PLU garden managers did assist with watering the garden during the summer months. PLU students could be used to visit classes and help children sow or harvest food, or assist the garden manager with the logistics of tending the garden.

Gleaning

The simplest and most effective way to make better use of the physical space of PLU's campus is to glean what food is already being produced on the land, and to plant more edible landscaping.

The plum and cherry trees are some of the most successful edible landscaping at PLU, and produce substantial amounts of fruit. If the currently existing trees can be harvested, they will produce a significant amount of food for the Emergency Food Network or any nearby food pantry. However, these plants (and several others) can continue to be planted in order to make the best use of PLU's land area and natural growing resources. The strip of wild hillside that separates upper and lower campus is currently undergoing restoration, wherein non-native species are removed, and native species can be introduced. This strip is already home to at least two cherry trees and a plum tree. Should more of this area be cleared of invasive species, planting fruit trees would be a very effective use of space.

Many other foods could potentially be introduced to the landscape of PLU, which could grow well and look beautiful while being productive sources of food. It should be noted that Facilities would probably require some outside assistance in order to seed, grow, and harvest some of these crops. Consistent student interest, even by one or two people, could be the deciding factor in having more edible landscaping. All that said, some easily implemented additions could include strawberries for ground cover, or more huckleberry or blueberry bushes in the gardens that surround most PLU buildings. If significant student support ever does come about, an option might be to make use of some PLU garden beds in the style of a conventional garden. Easy-to-grow and harvest plants could include rhubarb, carrots, squash, and various herbs.

Adding edible landscaping to PLU does come with some significant barriers, however. The first is mechanical: all newly planted edible landscaping would need to be watered, which would add to the workload of our Facilities department. There would need to be an intentional discussion about the additional duties that could be completed by the grounds crew, and whether or not the project could make use of any PLU students. If any students were to assist in the growing of food, they would need to be coordinated and held accountable by either another student leader, or by a member of the Facilities department. If any of the foods are non-permanent plant, such as rhubarb, carrots, and squash, the planting and clean up process after harvesting would require plenty of work, as well. If the food is allowed to go bad, or the beds become overgrown with weeds, it reflects poorly on PLU and its commitment to a beautiful, functional campus. Responsibility for the food would have to be clearly established.

In order to make best use of the edible landscaping that already exists at PLU, it might be possible to partner with the Harvest Pierce County Gleaning Project, rather than relying solely on PLU Facilities staff or student volunteers to harvest the available food. It is important to note that even the limited on-campus student, faculty, and staff personnel during summer months have the capacity to work toward this goal of gleaning all on-campus food, but that training and coordinator from Harvest Pierce would make this goal much easier to achieve. The Gleaning Project registers fruit trees that are currently going to waste, and organizes volunteer work parties to harvest the food, which can then be given to the Emergency Food Network and

transported to local food banks. The process of registering to be a part of the gleaning project requires a permanent contact person who could be responsible for the plants. This person could be a member of the Facilities team who will hopefully stay at PLU for a significant length of time, who is aware of the current edible landscaping and can direct volunteers to the fruit when it becomes ripe during the summer months.

As mentioned above, volunteers who harvest with the Gleaning Project are required to sign a liability waiver that protects both Harvest Pierce County and the owner of the fruit trees, should any harm befall the volunteer. This would also safeguard PLU from any legal ramifications of participating in the gleaning process, especially since all equipment is provided by the Gleaning Project, and should require no work on the part of PLU. Ideally, somebody in Facilities at PLU would be able to observe the fruit trees for any sign of disease or pests, and could inform Harvest Pierce about the state of the fruit ripening. However, Harvest Pierce also has volunteers that work to scout out the harvest should no contact person be available; so, if nobody at PLU was able to take on the task, the harvest could still continue without any assistance.

Food Reclamation

Another simple way to facilitate food distribution in Parkland is to take better advantage of the food that is made by Dining Services, yet goes uneaten. Already, as noted above, there is a system in place for donating uneaten food that has remained within safe heat zones. However, this system is mostly facilitated by just one or two staff members, and is generally not well documented. Implementing a consistent system of food reclamation with regular donation times and volunteers could hugely benefit patrons of local food pantries.

One of the first things that a good food reclamation system requires is a realistic leadership system, which might have to rely on volunteer and/or student work until funding can be secured. Dining staff members must comprise a part of the system, but expecting them to complete the food distribution process entirely on their own is unrealistic. In general, paying students to do social justice-related work is the most effective way to keep and hold interest in the cause. As much as volunteers are vital to most programs, they can be inconsistent or difficult to communicate with, as well as underappreciated if the leadership team does not devote enough time to honoring their work. The success of a program depends on consistency and devotion to the cause, which comes much more easily if participants are paid for their work. Because of this, I encourage applying for grants or securing funding from an on-campus department to pay at least one or two students for a few hours' work per week. They could support the ongoing food reclamation efforts of Dining employees, and put more work into securing adequate storage space, streamlining the transportation process, and ensuring the food is properly packaged and distributed.

Even with adequate paid support, logistical barriers aplenty exist in the process of transferring food from a kitchen to a food bank. Food reclamation coordinators would have to be on hand to store the food immediately after Dining shifts end, or coordinate a system of communication and a specific space for storing food. Program coordinators could repackage food for easy transportation and distribution to local food banks, but they would need either disposable or reusable containers, which would have to be paid for from some budgeting or fundraising. The Luther College model could be followed, wherein funding for the containers

comes from the Sustainability department. Transportation logistics would have to account for the schedules of students and access to the food banks/their workers. If the food is being transported to Trinity Lutheran Food Pantry, the church would be open most weekdays during business hours, which would allow volunteers to store food in the walk-in fridge or freezer of the food pantry. A system of communication, which perhaps could be as simple as the donated produce record already present in the food pantry storage space, would allow PLU volunteers and food pantry volunteers to communicate. Ideally, however, food would be transported to the food pantry when its volunteers are present. Instructions on how to store and reheat food could be attached to the repackaged food itself, for the benefit of both food pantry workers and clients.

Although this system requires some setup time and coordination efforts, a well-established process could prevent a great deal of food from going to waste. The most important factors in establishing a good food reclamation system are leadership and communication: leadership in the form of consistent, well-supported volunteers or paid students, and communication between dining staff, repackaging staff, and food bank staff. With these factors, PLU could form a solid relationship between the delicious food we make for our students, and the members of the community who need it most.

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this report, there is a great deal that PLU can be doing to be a better community partner for Food Justice efforts. If we can engage with our community in a meaningful way, using the resources we have at our disposal given our status as a private university, we can facilitate some real, sustainable, tangible change in the Parkland community.

If I could describe my highest hopes for PLU's future community involvement, I would say it essentially involves the formation of a lasting bond with community partners. It would have healthy food being produced by the PLU community garden and being gleaned from gardens on campus, which could be used in canning demonstrations at Trinity Lutheran Church and tastings at Keithley Middle School. It would have regular involvement with and mentorship of the Washington High School and/or Keithley students, who could be given practical knowledge in farming and gardening, and development of communication, teambuilding, and leadership skills. It would be a system where uneaten food from Dining Services would be repackaged and given to the food pantry, where PLU students worked as volunteers so that they could better understand the struggles and challenges that face low-income residents of Parkland. And it would see a campus culture that understands the health risks of our fast food economy, locally and globally, and that seeks to advocate for change in the corporate food system.

The reality is, we are far from seeing PLU engage in food justice in this way. However, as I have demonstrated, there are many small, tangible steps that could be taken that would facilitate change toward this ideal picture. An active role in the food justice movement, I believe, would go a long way toward educating our students for lives of thoughtful service, inquiry, and care for other persons, our communities, and for the earth. Food justice plays into every element of the PLU mission statement, which needs to be recognized and understood if we truly are going to be good stewards of our natural resources.

With this in mind, we'll move forward toward becoming a better community partner. I hope that the PLU community can embrace this process as a way of learning more from the

Parkland residents than has ever been possible in the past. If we let food unite us, we can find common ground and become a piece of a more sustainable food system.

References

GRuB Impact Report. 2013. Accessed 30 Apr 2016: http://goodgrub.org/wp-content/uploads/Infographic-for-Annual-Report.pdf

Fontana, K. 2006. Common Ground: Proposal for an Organic Community Garden at Pacific Lutheran University. Pacific Lutheran University Department of Sustainability.

Hylander, C. 2011. Food Justice. Pacific Lutheran University Department of Sustainability.

Saul, N., and Curtis, A. The Stop. New York: Melville House, 2013. Print