

Activating Student Voices Through Experiential Learning

Nicole Wong: University of California Global Food Initiative Experiential Learning Fellowship and the Berkeley Food Institute

Introduction

Experiential learning (EL) is learning that is rooted in experience. Growth therefore occurs when individuals examine this initial experience and apply newfound insights toward future action. If we conceive of EL in this way, then strengthening EL in food and agriculture on our campuses not only necessitates increasing opportunities for hands-on work on the farm and in the kitchen but also including undergraduate students in the development of food, agriculture, and EL programming in the first place. Seeking out undergraduate student participation in discussions and decision-making within these areas is an experiential learning opportunity in itself: a chance for critical analysis of past experiences that can then inform ongoing campus efforts in food and agriculture.

Thus, EL in food and agriculture may look like seeking out student wisdom and involvement during the process of writing grants that will affect the student EL experience or on-campus food environment. It may also look like creating space for undergraduates to present their work and insights at EL workshops, dialogues, and conferences. Furthermore, it is important that we actively engage students in campus stakeholder meetings so that they can advocate for programs and focus areas that best represent student needs and interests.

My work as an Experiential Learning Fellow and Student Ambassador at UC Berkeley has centered around amplifying undergraduate student voices and increasing their participation in campus efforts related to food and agriculture. Ultimately, when we value undergraduate student voices in all stages and aspects of food and agriculture programs, students have the opportunity to deepen their learning while campuses encourage open communication, ensure the longevity of its programs, and build community.

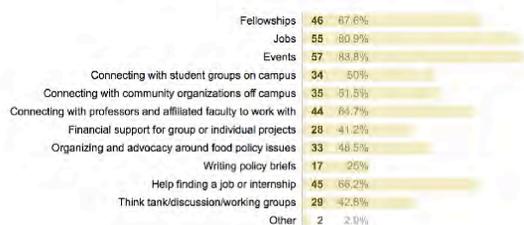


Project Goals

Within the overarching goals of engaging more students in EL food and agriculture opportunities and increasing student representation in the very development of food and agriculture programs, I worked toward the following project goals:

- Manage and increase readership of the Berkeley Food Institute's Student Opportunities Newsletter
- Coordinate UC Berkeley's participation in the spring multi-campus "Experiential Learning in Food and Agriculture" conference hosted by the GFI Experiential Learning Subcommittee
- Conduct outreach and interview student leaders of UC Berkeley campus gardens to inform a grant in support of campus farms and gardens
- Form an undergraduate student advisory council to the Berkeley Food Institute (BFI)

What kinds of student engagement are you most interested in?



Survey results compiled by Daniel Blaustein-Rejto

Materials and Methods

To manage and disseminate the Student Opportunities Newsletter, I used the Mailchimp platform. I promoted wide access and readership by reaching out to a diverse selection of student groups and entities on campus, starting with ones centered around food and moving out to campus spheres with other missions and focuses. I also tabled at various events to increase readership.

Building off the network I formed during the fall semester, I emailed campus leaders involved or interested in experiential learning in food and agriculture in order to convene a Berkeley delegation to participate in the "Experiential Learning in Food and Agriculture" conference that took place in Davis on February 20th. In addition to seeking their help publicizing the conference, I also sought out individuals to co-facilitate morning and afternoon sessions. Through email and telephone conferences I worked with staff from other campuses to decide the topical theme and layout of the morning workshop session. In order to make the workshop inclusive and tailored to participants, we sent out a request for break-out discussion suggestions ahead of time. Lastly, I enlisted students from various on-campus gardens to co-present on UC Berkeley campus farm and garden management.

I conducted online surveys and in-person interviews of campus garden student leaders to learn about garden needs, challenges, and goals moving forward. I then aggregated this information into two summary documents and applied this information toward multiple uses (see below).

Survey results compiled by Daniel Blaustein-Rejto. Lastly, I distributed a survey through the Student Opportunities Newsletter asking how the Berkeley Food Institute could better serve student interests. I used this survey to seek out interested undergraduates to become part of the first undergraduate student council to the Berkeley Food Institute. After convening the first meeting, all attendees agreed to enlist one more representative to increase the council size. At the second meeting, we discussed the council's governance and future campus role.

Results and Outcomes

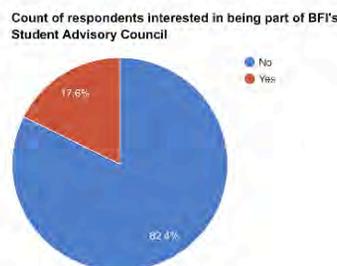
By the end of my fellowship term, I increased the number of subscribers to the Berkeley Food Institute's Student Opportunities Newsletter from 288 to 521 students.

I coordinated 15 Berkeley undergraduate and graduate students to attend the "Experiential Learning in Food and Agriculture" conference and four students including myself to co-present in the morning session on the theme "Managing Student Farms and Gardens for Success." Our presentation highlighted UC Berkeley student-led gardens and was the only presentation at the conference that included undergraduate students as presenters. The conference enabled students, staff, and faculty from four UC campuses to exchange ideas and best EL practices while building connections.

Using the information I gained from surveys and interviews of campus student garden leaders, I compiled two documents. One was a summary of all collected garden data (challenges, needs, goals, history) and the other was an addendum to a grant proposal that the GFI EL subcommittee was writing. This addendum, entitled "UC Berkeley's Student-Led On-Campus Gardens: Student Perspectives on Challenges and Needs" advocated that the grant proposal reflect the interests and needs expressed by student garden leaders at UC Berkeley while stating the importance of increased funding for EL in student-led gardens. Lastly, using the information from the first summary document, I created a UC Berkeley Gardens page and Global Food Initiative page on the Berkeley Food Institute website to create a central online hub for interested community members to learn about ways to get involved with gardens and GFI at UC Berkeley.

I recruited eight students to form an undergraduate student advisory council to the Berkeley Food Institute and from this council we selected the first undergraduate representative. This chosen representative will attend BFI executive committee meetings for a one year term and attended his first meeting on April 22nd. The committee plans on reaching out to student groups to listen to their ideas for the Berkeley Food Institute and advise BFI on its activities, events, outreach and focus areas.

Would you be interested in being part of BFI's Student Advisory Council?



Survey results compiled by Daniel Blaustein-Rejto

Conclusions

In sum, I learned that to be a GFI Experiential Learning fellow is ultimately to be an advocate for students. Efforts to promote experiential learning in food and agriculture on campus must involve the students who will be impacted by these programs. Likewise, campus food and agriculture programs grow stronger when their design and administration involves student input. In fact, including undergraduate students in this work creates a rich EL opportunity. For instance, at the "EL in Food and Agriculture" conference, students formally analyzed and then shared the most significant takeaways of their experience as garden leaders. Through the BFI Student Advisory Council, students practiced forming a governance structure, exploring BFI's opportunities for improvement, and setting priorities. Therefore, by placing students at the heart of food and agriculture programs, they gain new experiences, process old ones, and deepen their learning, all while improving existing structures and programs.



Future Goals

In the future, access to the Student Opportunities Newsletter should not depend on an individual's access to the Berkeley Food Institute or the EL fellow in charge of disseminating the newsletter. Thus, the future EL fellow can increase readership, especially for incoming freshman, by working to include it as a resource in packets and emails incoming students receive during orientation while also creating fliers and distributing them at central student locations like the Student Learning Center or Multicultural Center on campus.

Conferences on EL like the one held this past spring should become a periodic occurrence so that the UC community can build dialogues and relationships over time. Next academic year, the EL subcommittee can strive to put on one EL conference per semester. In between conferences, campus coordinators or EL fellows can convene meetings on their respective campuses to consider how to incorporate takeaways from the conference into existing programs and activities. The conference participants on each campus can also plan for future collaborations within and across campuses. Through this comprehensive structure, EL conferences can thus mirror and enact EL theory in practice by coupling action to analysis.

Moving forward, UC Berkeley can create a stronger campus garden network. The UC GFI or staff at the UC Botanical Garden can train student garden leaders in a common but tailored leadership development program and garden leaders can regularly convene to exchange ideas and support.

In the fall semester, the undergraduate advisory council will convene all members to decide on short and long term goals. It will invite various student groups to future advisory council meetings to ask about student interests and needs and then convey this information to the Berkeley Food Institute at its next executive committee meeting. The advisory council can also create a one-page written digest of the work that the BFI has done to support students over the 2016-2017 year and how students have become involved in that process.

Literature Cited

- Kaplan, K., Parr D., Sowerwine J., Thrupp L.A., & Van Horn M. (2016). *Learning from the Ground Up: Experiential Learning in Food and Agriculture Systems Education at the University of California*. UC Global Food Initiative.
- Kolb, A.Y. & Kolb, D. (2008). Experiential Learning Theory: A Dynamic, Holistic Approach to management Learning, Education and Development. In Armstrong, *The SAGE Handbook of Management Learning, Education and Development* (pp. 42-68).

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