

# Cultivating community and belonging in a campus garden

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## INTRODUCTION

- People of color make up about 12-16% of U.S. environmental organizations (Green 2.0, 2014). Paradoxically, people of color (Latinx, Asian, Black) report higher levels of environmental concern than white demographics while public perception rates the concern of white people as higher than that of people of color (Pearson, Schuldt, Romero-Canyas, Ballew, & Larson-Konar, 2018)
- Studies of sustainability culture at UCSC likewise show that students of color and low-income students participate in environmental sustainability activities at lower rates than white students likely because university sustainability spaces do not feel welcoming for them (Lu *et al.*, 2018)
- However, sustainability spaces led by students of color may function as counter-spaces, where students sharing a similar racial or ethnic background are affirmed and validated within institutions that recreate oppressive social structures and demographically or culturally marginalize students of color.

## QUESTIONS

1. How do student gardeners make meaning of their garden and its work?
2. How does the garden group position itself relative to the campus community and social/environmental justice?
3. Does participation in the garden group influence student sense of belonging and agency?

## METHODS

- Partnered with a campus garden organized and led by students of color
- Carried out participant observation 1 to 3 times a week over three quarters
- Documented observations using ethnographic field notes
- Conducted semi-structured interviews with key informants
- Used iterative approach to coding field notes and interview responses

## EMERGENT THEMES

- 1) **Gardening more than just food.** Students explicitly conceptualized the garden as a space that focuses on community building and celebrates multiple ethnic and gender identities. For example, students often described their garden group by saying, “We’re trying to not just be the garden that gardens.” Students employed art, music, and poetry in the garden to convey these messages and reported feeling a strong sense of belonging within the garden group compared to other university spaces.
- 2) **Discrepancy between actions and words.** Despite expressing an orientation towards sustainability and environmental justice, most students did not identify as environmentalist, saying they were not “perfect” enough to claim the label.
- 3) **For the benefit of humans and non-humans.** Garden group members maintained a firm stance of co-existence with wildlife in the garden. For example, in response to insect herbivory one student told me, “at least someone is eating it.” Students also voiced the needs of pollinators when considering modifications to garden vegetation.
- 4) **Challenging and expanding conventional notions of health and community.** Garden leadership expressed wanting to support their communities on campus by sharing food, funding, and other resources with other student group allies. Some students pursued discussions around food security and justice, asserting that “Every time you spend money on food—that’s an act of violence because you shouldn’t have to spend money on a basic necessity.”

## CONCLUSIONS

- Students prioritized not only food but also the wellbeing of their community, including humans and non-humans, in garden management and activities.
- Students frequently voiced environmental concerns but considered the perfection associated with environmentalism out of reach for themselves
- Participating in the garden group benefited students by providing a community they identified with visually, linguistically, and culturally, enhancing sense of belonging.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Conduct additional rounds of coding until theoretical saturation is reached
- Use results to provide recommendations for working towards a campus sustainability culture that is more diverse and welcoming for students from marginalized backgrounds



## LITERATURE CITED

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