

THE GUELPH CENTRE FOR URBAN ORGANIC FARMING

A Case Study

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Centre for
Sustainable
Food Systems



*Nourishing
Communities*

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Executive Summary

“It could become a much more powerful resource in the community as the needs and challenges increase. So it’s like a little repository of knowledge that we could probably scale up.”

- Martin Ronda

The Guelph Centre for Urban Organic Farming (GCUOF) is a certified organic farm at The Arboretum, University of Guelph, which is focused on teaching sustainable urban practices in food production and acting as a living laboratory for departmental research. The University of Guelph was the first school in North America to have an Organic Agriculture major, and is unique in offering both applied on-site learning in addition to conventional academic learning (Jalal, 2010). This program trait attracts interest from prospective students, community members and like-minded organizations.

In 2008 this innovative centre was developed on a one-hectare plot of land at The Arboretum. Since then it has become a field classroom for students from the Ontario Agriculture College and other disciplines. It is a place where one can learn about sustainable food production, permaculture, heritage seed production, and food security (University of Guelph, 2015). The practices and teachings focus on organic agriculture in a post-oil world; through the cultivation of minds and research, the outputs have the potential to be at the forefront of the sustainable food movement.

During this era of consumerism, mass production and resource degradation, innovative individuals are seeking alternatives to this consumerist lifestyle. The existence of GCUOF provides an opportunity to experiment and find best practices in urban organic farming. Backed by a growing shift and public demand for more sustainable lifestyles, the organic food movement works towards social and environmental responsibility.

While GCUOF’s primary purpose is to be a learning and research platform, its involvement and outreach in the community has numerous added benefits. The farm relies heavily on volunteer involvement and much of the success of the farm would not be possible without outside help. Through its teachings and culture, the farm works toward building adaptive capacity, increasing prosperity, increasing social capital, bridging divides, and fostering innovation. GCUOF inspires conservation about



sustainable agriculture, provides satisfaction in knowing where one's food comes from, and prepares us for a different future.

Project Overview

GCUOF is a 1-hectare learning and research facility established by the Ontario Agricultural College within the Department of Plant Agriculture at the University of Guelph. The farm's primary purpose is to be a classroom for post-secondary teaching and an organic farming research facility. The original vision for GCUOF was to create a farm that would provide hands-on learning for students interested in planting, tending, and harvesting crops manually using organic principles (GCUOF, 2015). A non-profit farm, GCUOF follows and advances the University of Guelph's five priority areas: Food, Environment, Health, Teaching and Learning, and Community (see Figure 1).



Figure 1 – University of Guelph Five Priority Areas. Image modified from The Better Planet Project. <http://www.thebetterplanetproject.ca>

GCUOF began in Guelph, Ontario, in 2008 from an idea spearheaded by Dr. Ann Clark, then an Associate Professor of Plant Agriculture at the University of Guelph. The program was founded on the desire to create an urban farm in a post-oil environment. Faculty members from numerous departments supported the creation of this initiative, e.g., plant biology, applied nutrition, soil science, agricultural economics, hospitality, and landscape architecture (University of Guelph, 2008). Dr. Clark involved Martha Gay Scroggins, an organic farmer and now Farm Coordinator. The project received funding from visionary donors, and planning assistance from three non-governmental Agencies: the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario, the Canadian Organic Growers, and Farmstart. The idea became a reality (University of Guelph, 2008).



Today, GCUOF stays true to its number one goal of being a teaching farm. University of Guelph students have the opportunity to participate in the farm as a hands-on classroom to learn about urban organic food production without the use of oil, pesticides and machinery. Through a program called Garden2Table, elementary school students also have access to the farm where they learn about biodiversity, sustainability, and the food chain, while also contributing to production. The children take farm produce to campus where Hospitality and Tourism students teach them about nutrition and how to prepare the food. Daycare students from the campus daycare make visits to the farm and have their own garden to grow and harvest

vegetables. GCUOF also involves both student and community volunteers in all aspects of food production - planting, watering, weeding, and harvesting. It teaches that urban gardeners too, through proper techniques, can have a healthy and bountiful food garden in their own backyards without needing too much space. GCUOF produce is harvested and sold at an on-campus market on a weekly basis. This allows students, faculty and staff to have access to healthy, nutritious food with the satisfaction of knowing that it was grown nearby and just harvested. The farm has been certified organic for 8 years by EcoCert Canada.

As research is a big part of teaching, GCUOF operates as a hands-on living laboratory. This has been a component of GCUOF's mandate from the beginning. In 2008, Dr. Clark suggested that "students might monitor trends in vitamin content in produce, determine pathogen risks on fresh vegetables, study the economics of market gardening, or look at ways to improve soil and water use efficiency" (University of Guelph, 2008). Today, some of the research conducted on the farm includes the use of high tunnels in organic vegetable production, the potential for breeding soybeans, food forests, and composting (University of Guelph, 2015). Over time, GCUOF has offered experiential learning opportunities; it is hoped that, in the future, participants will be advocating for social, moral, and environmental responsibility while making improvements to our current food system.

Context

GCUOF is located at The Arboretum in Guelph, Ontario. The Arboretum, an integral part of the University of Guelph, has a mandate to promote education, research and outreach. The City of Guelph is community-driven and prides itself on making a difference, having respect for the environment, acting locally and globally, and being an active and innovative community (City of Guelph, 2015). GCUOF espouses these same goals and values.



Photography courtesy of GCUOF Photo Gallery

PROJECT RESOURCES

Human Resources

GCUOF's Farm Coordinator, and Sessional Lecturer in the Department of Plant Agriculture, is Martha Gay Scroggins. Martha Gay began working with GCUOF in 2009, and has been a vital component in the daily activities and success of the farm - she is the glue that holds it all together. GCUOF also has one seasonal part-time farm steward, Martin Ronda, who has been employed at the farm since 2012. Martin brings a breadth of knowledge and experience to the farm, along with a contagious passion for farming.

In addition to Martha Gay and Martin, student interns are hired for the summer months if funding is available. These students provide additional and invaluable support on the farm. During the summer of 2015 there was one Undergraduate Research Assistant, and two interns financially supported through the Garden2Table project. GCUOF was also able to employ Patrick Kelly, a full-time seasonal farm worker; this position was made possible through outside funding from the Youth Employment Fund (YEF) and the High Tunnel Research project. As with any non-profit organization, there is always a need for more human and financial resources. GCUOF is fortunate to have a volunteer Media Relations Correspondent, Michelle Arseneault, who maintains GCUOF's website and all social media outlets. Social media and public outreach are extremely important to GCUOF's success.

GCUOF also relies heavily on volunteer participation. The volunteer workforce participates on a seasonal basis, typically from April to November, and is comprised of community members, university students, and visitors from all walks of life. The experience and knowledge level of these participants varies, but everyone is welcome and accepted on the farm. Staff value the unique qualities each volunteer brings to the table; truth is, the farm would not exist if it were not for volunteer contributions.

Physical Infrastructure

Sited on what was an old agricultural field, GCUOF received permission from The Arboretum to create what is now a thriving food-production site. Starting from scratch, the development of the gardens was slow, as it takes time to prepare and build the soil for farming.

Today, the farm is neatly organized into rows that maximize space and optimize layout. Apart from the rich soil, the farm infrastructure includes a shed, a shipping container for the purposes of an on-site office and tool storage, and a hand-dug pond. Tools have



been either donated or purchased through departmental inputs. A tractor is a very recent addition to the farm. In the fall of 2009, a hoophouse was donated by FarmStart and the Ignatius Jesuit Centre; installation of the hoophouse was made possible through money received from the University's Student Teaching Enhancement Fund. The hoophouse is fully functional in the summer months and has been able to help with some winter operations; however, it is not able to accommodate workshops. Seeds are saved and stored in Martha Gay's office in the Bovey building for the winter. Recently, other hoophouses were installed for research on vegetable production by Dr. Youbin Zheng. The site has a groundwater monitoring well as part of Dr. Beth Parker's Centre for Applied Groundwater Research; while not potable, GCUOF is able to store some of this water for irrigation purposes. Another important part of GCUOF's infrastructure is its website. A lot of potential volunteers and donors are directed to the site as a means for communicating important information. It has become a valuable tool in promoting and connecting GCUOF to the surrounding community.

Financial Resources

The initial funding for GCUOF came from the Garden2Table project, which covered the salary of the Farm Coordinator position for five years. The sale of produce at the campus market and the sale of seedlings in the spring generate some funds to help cover inputs and wages. Otherwise, the farm has to be very creative to find financial support – it must look for various forms of in-house funding as well as outside contributions. Currently, GCUOF receives university funding through STEF (Student Union Teaching Enhancement Fund), High Tunnel Research funds, Retired Faculty Research Funds, and Undergraduate Research Assistant funds. The remainder of GCUOF's resources greatly depend on contributions from community members and organizations.

Community Resources

GCUOF relies heavily on community resources for its ongoing support and operation. First, the work that volunteers do on the farm is indispensable. Without this help, the productivity on the farm would be greatly reduced due to a lack of labour capacity. Over time, GCUOF has built connections with local youth and school boards by providing tours, engaging students and sharing knowledge. These students then go home and promote GCUOF to their families; this creates a broader group of people who have an awareness of the farm. GCUOF is also part of the University of Guelph network, which results in donations of materials such as bales of straw, woodchips, and manure. When purchasing tools or supplies, GCUOF tries to buy locally, and over time



has built positive relationships with companies and organizations with a similar mindset. GCUOF's website offers information on donation opportunities. An infographic lays out the amount that is needed for a year of operation for GCUOF and provides step-by-step instructions on how individuals can donate. GCUOF is resourceful in how it acquires funding, but with a shoestring budget, donations are a necessity and gratefully appreciated.



Building Adaptive Capacity

Economic Resilience

GCUOF provides its full-time employees with their primary source of cash income; however, the source of this income varies and is often uncertain. For the part-time employees, income from GCUOF supplements other sources, or provides a little extra that they would otherwise have to do without. The farm has created a fair number of work opportunities for students over the years – work that would not have existed without GCUOF.

Volunteers experience secondary economic benefits. Although not receiving any monetary compensation, volunteers often leave the farm with a fresh harvest of produce, given to them to show appreciation for their hard work. This decreases an individual's dependence on the cash economy, as the 'free' produce reduces the amount they have to spend on groceries. As well, through their time on the farm, the volunteers experience a very effective knowledge-sharing environment and learn about techniques that they can apply to their own home gardens. Volunteers also gain employment references, which can be indispensable if one is interested in a career in a similar sector.

As well, exposure to local organic farming opens one's mind to foods available through other local farmers and provides the potential to keep cash in the local economy.

Food System Resilience

I think that the number of volunteers that come through [the farm] and the information that we try to share with people – especially just the perspectives that we try to share – help to increase food security because we try to support people growing as much as they can in a little space.

- Patrick Kelly

Despite its small size, GCUOF does its part to increase food security in the community for its employees, students, and volunteers. It is important in this case to look at food security in two parts: short-term and long-term. With regard to short-term food security, GCUOF provides much food to a local women's shelter, donates seedlings and seeds to community gardens, and to the Student Food Bank. The food sold at the campus market is a way to provide quality, locally grown, organic produce for a reasonable price to those who frequent the market. While food security within the community is not GCUOF's primary goal, they help where they can.

Food security is especially a long-term goal, as to whether or not we will be able to feed ourselves into the future. Through experiential learning, GCUOF participants are educated about how to grow food depending on their gardens' soil types, and how to grow with passive solar gain, very minimal water, and as little fossil-fuel input as possible. This provides participants with valuable tools to increase success in their own personal food production. In essence, through raising awareness and experiential learning, GCUOF is growing future gardeners and farmers.

Ecological Resilience

GCUOF is providing ecological benefits to the landscape. Before its creation, the site was an old field on The Arboretum grounds. Since being converted to the farm, there has been an increase in biodiversity, for example in bird populations, butterflies and other insects, and in wildlife in general. Many of the plant species grown at GCUOF are heritage varieties, which contributes to The Arboretum's mandate. To create habitat for beneficial insects, and pollinators in particular, the farm has made a conscious effort to border plantings with pollinator-friendly annuals and perennials. In addition to the increase in biodiversity, the farm sequesters carbon, and has increased the amount of organic material and fertility of the soil, thereby improving the capacity to grow food.



These ecological benefits also increase the potential of the community to cope with environmental change. This is done “through the teaching of renewable energies, organic farming, water conservation, and low oil-input into food production” (Martha Gay Scroggins). As environmental challenges change and evolve, the knowledge, scale, and model that GCUOF demonstrates could “become far more helpful; it could become a much more powerful resource in the community as the needs and challenges increase. So it’s like this little repository of knowledge that we could probably scale up” (Martin Ronda). Throughout the year, a few hundred people visit the farm; the more that people learn about the techniques and practices used at GCUOF, the greater the potential for their food security. GCUOF provides a unique opportunity for community members to ask questions, and learn what is involved in ecological farming and what is needed to grow one’s own food. The farm’s biodiversity also allows the site to cope with environmental change. The plantings are generally resilient, in that there is a diversity of species and therefore the food production is less vulnerable to pests overall than if it was a monoculture. This creates a safety net for the farm itself.

Increasing Prosperity

Addressing Inequalities

The more infrastructure that we can build to accommodate the needs of everybody, the more we could offer.

- Martha Gay Scroggins

Along with the direct and indirect economic benefits gained by those working at GCUOF, the volunteer program works to increase local prosperity in other ways. First, there is no prerequisite required when coming to volunteer, or learn about food production on the farm. Those working at GCUOF welcome everyone with open arms and take pride in sharing knowledge about how to grow food on a small, local scale.

It is likely that marginalized communities will be the ones who may experience the burden of food shortages first. By welcoming all members of the community, GCUOF provides an opportunity to increase food access and food knowledge. All those who volunteer on the farm are able to leave with some food at the end of the workday. The experience also provides people with the opportunity to learn how to grow their own food, allowing them to save money and become more sustainable by doing so. Often limited to the long-shelf-life food provided by food banks, for the food insecure participating in the farm exposes people to new foods, the benefits of eating them, and how to grow them in one's own garden. The existence of GCUOF as an alternative to typical food production and distribution addresses in some small measure the inequality of access that is often experienced by those who are marginalized.

Over the years, First Nations groups have visited the farm to learn how they could increase their food production, and students from the university's Aboriginal Resource Centre have received donated plant material. GCUOF does not let its limited funding affect its ability to help address social inequalities in the community and beyond. However, there is an awareness that more could be done if funding were available.

Contribution to the Canadian Economy

While mainstream agriculture is based on an industrial scale model, there is an important role for small teaching farms like GCUOF; they offer a "repository of ideas that allow us to create food at a local level and on a small scale ... it's kind of like a recessive gene that is just sort of hanging around until it needs to express itself" (Martin Ronda). With recently growing government interest in fostering local food production, GCUOF contributes to the training and education of young farmers, and contributes to an increase in self-provisioning that could help reduce reliance on imports.

Another employee at GCUOF noted that one thing often missing from the measure of a healthy economy is the value of mental health. While many believe that the Canadian economy should be focused on the quantity of production or the amount of money being generated, it is often the quality of one's work or what employees spend their time doing that contributes to positive mental health. Working on an organic farm and interacting with the natural world can help one feel more connected. Being outside and doing physical labour can be both emotionally and physically beneficial. Although



those things are not generally accounted for in the measure of a healthy economy, they should be taken into consideration.

Local Economic Development

I think there is a small effect on the local economy. We get food out into the economy, which keeps the food dollars in the community...they don't go into the pockets of large conglomerates; the money stays in Guelph. So it goes round and round in Guelph, which is what we want it to do.

- Martin Ronda

GCUOF does what it can to support and contribute to local economic development. This contribution is two-fold. First, they make a point of not directly competing with local organic producers, who rely entirely on their production for their income. They avoid this competition by selling their food only on campus. The existence of the farm also creates a demand for local products, and they try to buy supplies, materials, and tools as locally as possible.

One could also argue that the on-campus market is exposing students to local organic foods, which in turn may cause a lifestyle change; those buyers may continue to seek more local foods. Another way GCUOF helps the local economy is by creating at least a few jobs a year that would not exist otherwise. These employees are, in turn, spending their money in the local economy. In the long term, regardless of whether they are employed on the farm or if they are volunteering, they are learning valuable skills that they can contribute to the economy.

Volunteer Labour

Even if you don't have your own garden, you've experienced working in our garden and you actually have a share of what comes off the farm.

- Patrick Kelly

The farm relies heavily on volunteer labour; in fact, Farm Coordinator Martha Gay Scroggins says the farm would not exist without volunteers. During the first few years of operation the volunteers were a critical component to get this project off the ground. Volunteers come from all walks of life, including students from various academic programs and a diverse group of community members. The amount of prior experience they have varies; regardless, their presence and help is invaluable, and staff appreciate whatever it is they can contribute.





Volunteers participate on a seasonal basis, typically from April to November. They are involved in everything at the farm, including seeding, weeding, mulching, watering, harvesting, etc. With the warming weather, April tends to be a popular month for students to volunteer. The summer sees an increase in community member presence, as well as students who are still in the area for the summer. Autumn is very popular and an important time to have good volunteer numbers, as they are critical in aiding with the fall harvest. The help that the volunteers provide enables farm productivity to increase, and that is enhanced with the presence of repeat and skilled volunteers.

Although volunteers are always welcome, GCUOF has worked to encourage and designate certain days to be volunteer days. Everyone on the GCUOF e-mailing list receives a link to a monthly sign-up sheet that enables staff to anticipate how many volunteers to expect. This helps set a schedule for the day and allows staff to be organized with the tasks they need to delegate. They have found over time, however, that this sign-up can also be a hindrance to the number of volunteers who show up that day as, sometimes, people feel bound to the time slots they signed up for, or are a lot less likely to show up because it is only a virtual commitment. As well, some volunteers are not as technically able as others, so this sign-up is not as effective as it could be.

Even though they are underfunded and there is a lack of infrastructure, GCUOF is grateful that the volunteer presence is so great. However, if there were more appropriate infrastructure, they would be able to accommodate everyone's needs, and therefore could offer more opportunities and enhance learning. The bottom line is that, with more volunteer presence on the farm, more can be produced.

Increasing Social Capital

We provide a market of fresh, local, organic vegetables, and a place to come, a place for people – for some, a refuge.

- Martha Gay Scroggins

Creating Networks

GCUOF provides a healthy environment for fostering working relationships. Often those who work and volunteer on the farm are of a similar mindset. The farm provides an opportunity to get connected with people who are interested in similar issues. Students in the Organic Agriculture major use the farm as a classroom, which provides a unique experience that is not gained in a typical classroom setting. Students work with one another to collectively harvest, clean, organize and sell produce, which can sometimes lead to high-pressure situations. Students have remarked that they learn much more about their classmates in this setting. These students are also presented with the opportunity to network with members of the campus community at the weekly market.



Along with the direct relationships that are fostered by those who work on the farm, GCUOF is associated with other groups that reach even further into the community. One of these associated groups is The Appleseed Collective. GCUOF helps this group with its efforts to disperse fruit trees throughout the community in the spring. As well, GCUOF has cooperated with student groups from other academic programs, allowing for the use of the property to further advance their studies. For example, entomology students can collect insects and engineering students can investigate rainwater conservation. Networks are also created with people outside the farm through different outreach programs and group farm visits. Visitors have included First Nations groups, elementary school groups, small-business owners, and others from the community who eventually become advocates for the farm.

Another important connection for GCUOF is its partnership with Garden2Table. Not only are they linked through shared funding and donor support, but they also share human resources. Garden2Table is a group of University of Guelph students, partnered with GCUOF and the School of Hospitality and Tourism, with the mandate to educate elementary school children on the importance of knowing how their food is grown and where it comes from (Garden2Table, 2015). After leaving the farm, the children are taught by the University of Guelph students how to cook food using the fresh produce. This is a very important program for promoting youth engagement and raising awareness about the benefits of local food production.

Building Knowledge

The greatest means of outreach that GCUOF offers is that of knowledge-sharing and skills-building. Whether it is paid staff, students or volunteers, everyone is involved with the growing of food in all aspects. Participants get experience preparing land, seeding, weeding, watering, working in the hoophouse, and harvesting. There is a valuable set of food production skills gained by working on the farm, but the nature of the farm also enhances communication and interpersonal skills.

Not only does knowledge-sharing take place amongst those working on the farm, but GCUOF is always eager to share its mandate with other groups near or far. For example, an Engineers Without Borders group from Toronto visited the farm to gain knowledge and skills they could apply to wherever it was they were going in the world. Some of the students in the Agriculture major come from commodity-production farms where most things are done on a large scale and with heavy machinery, and GCUOF may be their first experience where everything is done by hand labour. People are made aware of what can be achieved by hand and exposed to how this can foster a more intimate relationship with the food you are growing and eating. One is touching the



produce, watering it, picking it, washing it, eating it, and that requires observational and soft skills.

The farm provides a unique way of learning that cannot be achieved with mere verbal instructions. The hands-on nature of the farm, the extended amount of time working with others, and the informal teachings offer an irreplaceable form of knowledge-sharing and skill-building. The level of experience that people bring to the farm varies, and often the teachings go both ways. Staff can inform volunteers about best practices for growing food, saving seeds, building soil and saving water, and students and volunteers can bring past experiences to the conversation. GCUOF staff are always accepting of new ideas or other ways of doing things. For example, a student may have come from a farming family, or may have previously interned on a farm, and can offer valuable knowledge that can contribute to increasing productivity. Everyone is working as a team towards a larger goal.

Creating a Culture

The work at GCUOF fosters a particular cultural environment. It recognizes the current societal trend towards mass production and consumption and offers an alternative. GCUOF's alternative is to create a culture that acknowledges that in the future there will likely be water shortages, and reduced access for many to land and machinery that is required for large-scale agriculture. A knowledge-sharing culture allows people to learn to grow on a small scale and with a limited supply of resources.

GCUOF grows the typical fruits and vegetables that are in demand in the surrounding area. However, the farm's bounty goes beyond the basic vegetables with which many university students and community members are familiar. Those who consume the farm's produce are exposed to a diverse and rich harvest. Although limited by the soil and climate of the area, many international students are thrilled to see some of their favourite foods growing at the farm.





Social and Political Change

Social change is a large part of GCUOF's reach. Over the years the farm has had many student volunteers, some of whom have taken the physical skills, the soft skills, and the important lessons learned on the farm and are now engaged community members. Even some of the smallest things experienced on the farm can play a larger role in who they are now.

While political change is not a large part of the agenda at GCUOF, many people who volunteer are part of different political and social justice movements. GCUOF does "advocate food security issues and, just by existing, we're trying to teach people that they are able to grow their own food ... that in a way is a form of quiet social and political change" (Patrick Kelly). Change is not necessarily documented, but people do come back and share the breadth of their experiences.

Bridging Divides

It's sort of like all these pebbles thrown in a pond and these ripples go outwards and it's not what you thought it was going to be when you started. It turns into, often, unexpected directions.

- Martha Gay Scroggins

Cross-Sector Impacts

GCUOF's mandate has always been to teach organic farming principles in a post-oil environment that can be applied on a larger scale. Eight years after its founding, this mandate continues to guide the way that GCUOF operates. Over time, the farm has realized its work leads to broader impacts, including environmental benefits, social support, and contributions to local economic development.

The knowledge-sharing that occurs on the farm is a vital resource in contributing to the overall organic agriculture movement. Due to limited resources, much of this cannot happen through formal workshops or community outreach programs. The farm does reach out and engages with the community, but most of the knowledge-sharing occurs in an informal way. The network of people created through interaction with the farm has the opportunity to have a significant impact over time. The organization also acts as a vital connector in the organic agriculture community. GCUOF staff are always eager and willing to help participants make connections with others in the community and put people in touch with those who can perhaps benefit from each other. GCUOF has evolved into a social hub, and the knowledge-sharing experienced here increases the resilience of the Guelph community and beyond.

The influence of GCUOF not only reaches the university population and the community of Guelph, but also contributes to international awareness. The farm has given tours to international visitors from places such as Haiti, Zambia, Finland and Mexico; many of these visitors are professional agronomists. After learning what happens on the farm, they are often impressed with its beauty and function, and are pleased that the University of Guelph has gone beyond thinking on only an industrial-agriculture level and has fostered an alternative approach. While staying true to its mandate, GCUOF's impacts and the extent of its reach has extended beyond what was originally imagined.

Making Connections

The GCUOF environment connects people across many social groups and from all walks of life. The nature of the farm, and its opportunities for people to “drop in,” create a welcoming environment for anyone. The farm encourages and appreciates help from students and from volunteer community members, resulting in a diverse group working at the farm on any give day. There are people from different age groups, economic statuses, cultures, religions, philosophies and perspectives. GCUOF is a socially-connected entity that fosters a sense of community and belonging that is reinforced by the nature of the work people do there.



Fostering Innovation

GCUOF offers a unique on-campus learning experience for students that goes beyond conventional classroom teachings. The farm attempts to learn about and practice new and innovative ideas from around the world, and aims to “provoke [the students] to think and investigate further into agricultural issues” (Martha Gay Scoggins). This promotes a deeper investigation into alternatives to the conventional ways of conducting business or growing foods; examples include how to do business in a different way, how to market better, how to get food into different areas, and learning about the culturally-appropriate foods for different social or ethnic groups. Most importantly, the work there is not just about food; it is about the whole food system.

In part, GCUOF’s ability to achieve this systems thinking is possible because of the range of people it is able to reach. A university campus offers GCUOF a mix of genders, races, socio-economic statuses, and cultures because the university population is so diverse. The impact is two-fold. First, the students who become familiar with the fundamental values of the farm can take them with them into their futures. Second, many disciplines benefit from the presence of the farm; there are students from International Development, Nutrition, Hospitality, Medicine, Engineering, Biology, Arts and Sciences, Landscape Architecture, etc. Regardless of the discipline, the farm has the potential to provoke new ways of thinking.

Resources Needed to Sustain the Project

As outlined before, the limited funding GCUOF receives and, as a result, the minimal physical infrastructure present are the two biggest constraints that keep the farm from reaching its full potential. When asked if the farm, as a farm, is sustainable, Martha Gay Scroggins gave an interesting answer: “Well, it’s not sustainable. It *would* be sustainable for two people to operate an acre and a half, or two acres of vegetable production, but not with volunteers, student classes, school tours – you would have to take the whole community component away” (Martha Gay Scroggins).

The GCUOF is a teaching environment and it must be kept as such, but this means that the farm needs to be financially supported by the University. Teaching takes up a large portion of the Farm Coordinator’s time, but her role becomes difficult due to the need to balance work with volunteers and a focus on efficiency of production.



Currently, all revenue generated at the farm contributes to inputs and employee income. Any funds for investment into the development of GCUOF must come from fund-raising, resulting in a heavy reliance on grant funding from foundations and government programs. Grants do exist but are very competitive and often difficult to find; it is likely that funding will be even more difficult to acquire in the future. On-site research needs to be encouraged as that does bring in funding and emphasizes the importance of the GCUOF space as a living laboratory.



Constraints

GCUOF has identified four key barriers that limit further growth and success:

The first barrier is the lack of infrastructure, which restricts the ability to accommodate more volunteers, more school groups, more tours, and more workshops. If there is an opportunity to improve the physical infrastructure, GCUOF would install a means of providing potable water, a toilet, and perhaps a shelter or kitchen. This shelter or facility would allow for a more efficient way to prepare produce for the market as well as provide a place where people on the farm could gather to provide a sense of community. The lack of potable water and toilet facilities is a large issue especially when it comes to school groups; this means that young people are not able to be on the farm for long periods of time, which is a disadvantage. Also one must take into consideration that the land that GCUOF has to work with is in itself limited.

The second barrier is the poor access and signage. In fact, the farm is nearly invisible from the road that runs along its length, due to an evergreen windbreak that lines the site and also creates unfavourable frost pockets on the farm. There is absolutely no sense of arrival to the site. Many of GCUOF's volunteers do not rely on cars for their

primary means of transportation, which is good because there is little to no parking available on-site; perhaps this lack of parking also hinders volunteer involvement. The location of the farm on campus is also unfavourable to anyone arriving by public transit, or even by foot from the main area of campus. To access what is considered to be the main entrance of the farm, one must actually cross a secluded parking lot. This lot tends to be occupied only by little-used construction equipment and for storing cars that have been towed due to unpaid parking tickets. Needless to say, it is a grim entry; it has been noted by GCUOF that access and signage changes need to be made in order to have a more welcoming presence for the community.

The third barrier is that the farm has no one living on site 24 hours a day. Farms do not follow the nine to five, Monday to Friday work regime of many employees. It is difficult to run a farm when someone is not there 24/7 – a farm is not a day job. Often, someone has to come in during off hours – usually Martha Gay or Martin – to make sure that everything is in order; for example, if there is a sweltering weekend, the plants need to be watered. A farm is also a year-round commitment. There are things that need to be done on site for at least ten months of the year, and in January and February seeds need to be cleaned and prepared. To enable adequate care on the farm and minimize unreasonable expectations from employees, the farm would benefit from someone living on-site.

The fourth barrier, and perhaps the most important, is the insufficient financial support for the farm. An increase in funding could improve and perhaps overcome the three aforementioned barriers. The University's financial support for the farm is not sufficient to support operations and production. GCUOF has to look to other funders and donors. The concern with turning to the private sector for donations is that the University may see this outside support as sufficient and therefore not invest University resources in GCUOF. In years when there is less funding available, fewer people are hired, which in turn lowers productivity and the amount of produce sold. This creates a difficult feedback loop. As well, adequate funding needs to be allocated for employing experienced labour. A lack of funding is the greatest threat to GCUOF's ability to operate at its full potential.

Future Plans

For the future of GCUOF, it is important to keep promoting the importance of on-site research, as this provides support and creates awareness for the farm. The more research conducted, the higher the likelihood that some of the most pressing agricultural issues of today could be answered. It is also important to make the farm more visible to the community. This could take the form of creating a sense of arrival,



and a sense of place for the site by adding a sheltered gathering place. As well, promotional materials such as t-shirts and bags would aid as a silent promoter on display out in the community.

Since volunteers are essential for the continued existence and prosperity of the farm, it is important for staff to look more closely at volunteerism. GCUOF has recognized the need to have a volunteer coordinator. Having a person in this position with experience and knowledge of what goes on at the farm allows them to delegate and direct, which would allow the Farm Coordinator to focus on teaching. This would allow everyone to be able to focus on learning as well as production. Logistically, modifications could be made to picking volunteer days and timeslots, as well as the means by which people sign-up to volunteer. It is important to pay close attention to volunteer needs and to take care of those needs while they are on the farm. GCUOF would like to do more for its volunteers, such as volunteer orientation and appreciation days, as well as harvest lunches throughout the summer season. Currently, with limits on funding, it is important to make sure that volunteers leave with some sort of harvest at the end of their workday.

Relevance to Other Projects

On a large scale GCUOF is part of a movement towards sustainable urban organic agriculture; on a smaller scale the farm is one of a handful of Canadian university campus farms. These farms promote small-scale farming, knowledge-sharing, experimental operations and innovation. Other Canadian universities with campus farms include, but are not limited to, the University of British Columbia, McGill, Mount Allison and Trent, albeit each individual entity is fairly tiny in nature. However, with its combination of hands-on learning, research support, community involvement and volunteer presence, GCUOF is unique. In an age of resource exploitation, climate change, and food security issues, these experimental farms are at the brink of new discoveries and new norms that can make a contribution to a sustainable future. Currently, there are not many universities around the world that have teaching farms; perhaps that is a goal for the future that GCUOF can help shape.



Online Resources

Guelph Centre for Urban Organic Farming: <http://uoguelph.ca/GCUOF>

GCUOF Photo Gallery: <http://flickr.com/photos/gcuof>

University of Guelph: <http://uoguelph.ca>

Garden2Table: <http://garden2table-garden2table.blogspot.com>

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