



Sense of Belonging in Agricultural Education Research to Practice

Fostering sense of belonging in a food access internship on a student farm

Background

Student farms and gardens are living classrooms where students teach each other and approach problem solving from an interdisciplinary, systems-based perspective (Parr & Trexler 2011). These opportunities can come in the form of internships and on-farm courses. Yet, if students do not feel a sense of belonging, they will not enter or thrive in student farm spaces. We define a “sense of belonging” as situations wherein students “feel socially connected, supported, and respected. Students can feel a disconnect with student farm spaces if they do not match their own worldview, e.g. experience of agriculture as a contested and demographically diverse space. Moreover, many students are acutely aware of, or themselves have, experienced some level of food insecurity. Student Farm based food access internship programs can help students feel more connected to each other, their campus and their broader community. Additionally, when students are forced into remote learning situations, for example due to a pandemic or natural disasters, food and community-based learning projects can also benefit students and their connection to community.



Papalo. image: [F Delventhal](#). CC BY 2.0 DEED

“This week the highlight of my week was the *papalo*. I was so giddy when we were going to harvest it. It is a special herb that brought back my family memories... I was excited to take some home to my family.”

“[They] have curated an environment where I feel respected and comfortable – I wish everyone could experience the same feeling.”

What we did:

During the COVID-19 pandemic we hosted remote project-based internships and employed student leaders continued to run our food access work. Students participating in remote internships developed social media content related to food security and food ways of the Asian Diaspora. Students also hosted a virtual event titled Cultural Diversity of Sacramento Valley Farms and developed videos about two local farmers. During this time, food access programs expanded to include distribution partners that support student parents, off-campus students, and broader community members. In addition, we worked with distribution partners and students to identify and grow more culturally important crops, such as gailan, methi, jamaica (hibiscus), sweet potato leaves, and *papalo*. For both in-person and remote internships we emphasized community and knowledge sharing, and recognized the inherent knowledge each student holds.

- 64 interns across the two years – each cohort was made up of five to ten students
- Over 30,117 pounds of produce distributed to partners, including campus pantry, Basic Needs centers, and student resources centers across the university

Overall, Rising Scholars¹ described their internship experiences as positive, hands-on learning opportunities within a supportive environment. They expressed connection to other students, the Student Farm, the campus food system, UC Davis generally, and the greater Davis area. Rising Scholars frequently used the words “confident” and “comfortable” in their final reports and final journal entries to describe their abilities with specific tasks, as well as their overall academic outlook at the end of their internship. While both onsite and remote interns shared learning about community and regional partners, onsite interns demonstrated a greater understanding of campus food security.

Best practices

Across the remote and in-person internships, we identified a number of practices that supported increased sense of belonging among students, including:

- **Create space for student leadership and peer-to-peer mentoring** so that internship activities are relevant and meaningful to the students involved. Interns feel comfortable exchanging feedback with peer mentors and benefit from having close peers who are modeling leadership.
- **Recognize that agriculture invokes different histories and power dynamics for many communities and individuals.** Family or community perceptions of agriculture can influence how some students engage; others may feel that they don’t have expertise if they are not in a science degree program. Use language and introductory materials to demonstrate and explicitly state that this is a learning space for everyone and that they all bring valued knowledge.
- **Ensure that students see a representation of diverse identities and histories in agriculture** through work with farmers of color, researchers, staff and other project partners, and through ensuring that many stories are elevated. Share memories of food and plants and invite students to connect – through course assignments – to people that inspire them.
- **Maintain small cohort size** to foster opportunities for personal connection and peer to peer learning. Make time for both formal and informal sharing, including time to make and share food.
- **Listen, read, learn, and reflect** as to what visible and invisible barriers exist in food security and food systems. How and why do the demographics of those impacted by food insecurity match those making decisions about it? What areas of expertise and ways of knowing do you recognize and use in your space?
- **Provide workshops in equity and inclusion** for all student employees and staff to develop new ways of communicating, delve into personal and community positions and values, and practice centering those values in daily work. This provided a productive and safer context for teamwork and learning in the internship.

¹ We follow the lead of the UC Davis Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) Task Force by referring to these underrepresented students, especially first generation, low-income undergraduates, and students of color as “Rising Scholars,” moving away from deficit-oriented labels to an asset-oriented view that acknowledges the value that Rising Scholars bring to their institutions (Aldana et al. 2019).

Aspects of the **in-person** internship central to student sense of belonging included:

- **Connect with distribution partners already working on student food security efforts**, especially partners with students in the lead, and foster two-way conversations about what your farm could provide and what partners want
- **Diversify plantings to include culturally important crops** that provide connection to diverse food traditions, work with students and distribution partners to identify relevant crops
- **Provide readings and hold space for conversations about food justice** and how student food access work fits into that movement

Aspects of the **remote** internship central to student sense of belonging included:

- **Create Community Agreements** that foster an online space of both safety and bravery for engagement and connection
- **Foster a sense of community** through personal check-ins, beginning from simple questions, such as ‘how are you?’ and ‘what hopes do we have for the coming week?’
- **Have a selection of remote projects** that students can choose from and that connect students with farms, campus and the broader community

Resources

- [@ucdfreshfocus; @aaseedstewards](#)
- (video) [Interview with Ron Kelly of R. Kelley Farms](#)
- (video) [Interview with Rom Kohtiwoda of New Roots Farm](#)
- [When Students Lead: Leadership Development Training Program Toolkit](#)

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References

Parr, D. M., Trexler, C. J. (2011) Students' Experiential Learning and Use of Student Farms in Sustainable Agriculture Education. *Journal of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Education*, 40. 172-180

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