Reflections from a Research Team Experience

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I’m a recent OS grad with interests in the environment, food, community organizing, and non-profits. This summer, thanks to a BLI grant, I’ve been working with Professor Sara Soderstrom on her research on the development of community within community gardens, a project well suited to my interests.

The research we are doing focuses on 3 organizations in Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti: Project Grow, the UM Campus Farm, and Growing Hope. Within these organizations, we are interested in when and how communities develop, how people join, and what resources (including knowledge, location, and space) are important to these communities. Much of my time is spent doing data collection through archival research, garden observations, and conducting interviews of organization leaders, garden site coordinators, volunteers, and gardeners.

This research project has been great because it’s given me the opportunity to hone existing skills and develop new ones. I’m continuing my education outside of the classroom, learning from local leaders and experts.
One of those experts is Professor Soderstrom. It’s been awesome to work with Sara because I have been able to watch and learn from the way she seamlessly connects theoretical ideas to practical operations of the gardens, as well as the way she navigates communications with these organizations. She has also been a thoughtful mentor while I search for my plans for the fall and beyond.

Other experts are the leaders of the organizations and gardens we’ve been researching, many of whom I have had the opportunity to talk with through interviews I’ve been conducting. One theme that is emerging is that being a good leader of a community organization is about facilitating opportunities for community members to be involved. It has been interesting to see the different approaches leaders take to engage the community in meaningful ways in order to motivate people to spending time as part of the organizations.

I have also been majorly self-directed this summer. It is Sara’s research, so I send everything through her for approval, but she has given me a lot of autonomy to be creative. For example, I did a lot of background research and helped select who to interview in each organization, I schedule and conduct solo interviews, my observations and field notes are also solo. The work has been rewarding because I feel a sense of ownership for it.

I’ve been spending time getting to know Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti from a whole new lens, no longer that of a student, but as a more connected community member, participating in the community in a new and meaningful way. I have also become an expert on community gardens—I now have the knowledge and skills to set up a community garden, or consult someone doing so. This research is inspiring me to continue working with organizations like these, bringing people together to create positive social and environmental outcomes.