

# Student Volunteer Ideal Type Formation in Community Gardens

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## Abstract

A community garden (CG) is a piece of land in which community members come together to grow plants, often food. Historically, gardening programs in the United States have been a response to economic shocks, emphasizing personal responsibility by growing one's own food to overcome economic issues. Frequently, their purposes are to create social capital and more sustainable food options, with many other ancillary benefits in health, education, value formation, and financial gain. Volunteers are necessary to achieve this. However, student volunteerism in a CG carries many challenges. College towns have a large proportion of transient college-aged residents because of the dominant role that a university holds in a city. These volunteers, being transient, may not contribute to or benefit from the community building central to a CG's purpose. This is exacerbated by a town-gown divide, the long-standing tensions between the university and the rest of a city. This paper draws from field notes and informal interviews in a community garden located in a college town to investigate these issues. A Weberian ideal type for student volunteers is constructed, identifying four key characteristics: consistency, willingness to learn, social competency, and self-sufficiency. This ideal type is then compared to reality in the garden, providing insight into why universities should prepare student volunteers to maximize impact and bridge the town-gown divide.

**Keywords:** *community garden, college town, volunteer, ideal type, town-gown divide*

## Community Gardens and College Towns

Historically, CG programs in the United States have emphasized personal responsibility in overcoming economic issues (Pudup). Thomas Bassett (1979) considers CGs to be a response to stressors that the nation's "cultural framework" experienced. What distinguishes a CG is its guiding purpose. The modern CG exists for the sake of community and garnering social capital, rather than solely for the creation of food. Here, "gardening was the means, not the end" (Lawson 2005, p. 231).

The college town phenomenon extends across the United States, forming an "academic archipelago" (Gumprecht 2008, p. 1). The university plays a large role in all aspects of a city, from cultural place-making to government policy. A "town/gown divide" exists (Maranto 2015, Rousmaniere 2021). Residents not tied to the university can feel frustrated; they are often excluded from decision-making that greatly impacts them (Rousmaniere 2021, Mapes et al. 2017). Studentification is perceived as a nuisance disruptive to the cultural character of neighborhoods and has been well documented to occur in college towns (Woldorf & Weiss 2018, Gumprecht 2003).



## Ideal Type Construction

Keeping in mind the context of college towns and community gardening practices, four characteristics have been identified to construct the ideal type of what a student volunteer in the Gainesville CG studied ought to be, created from field notes on informal conversations with leaders and volunteers. The model of an ideal type comes from Max Weber (1949) as a way to analyze socially constructed ideas with respect to reality.

### Consistency

Ideal consistency is showing up to weekly workdays and being punctual. This serves a role of easing capacity issues and saving time. Informally, consistency creates trust

### Willingness to Learn

Students often had little-to-no prior experience working in gardens or performing the tasks they did while volunteering. The lack of these skills, while not desired, did not appear to be a barrier to achieving the CG's goals. Volunteers of different experience levels working together provided many opportunities to learn from each other.

### Social Competency

Social competency is the willingness to openly interact with the guests and other volunteers in the garden. This characteristic is crucial in fulfilling the purpose of the garden.

### Self-Sufficiency

An ideal student volunteer completes tasks with minimal supervision and guidance. However, total self-sufficiency is impractical and unideal. Helping other volunteers and asking for help generates social capital.

## Implications

Creating an ideal type for student volunteers in a community garden has several implications. It creates expectations for incoming volunteers to be mindful of their own behavior. Yet, the ability of students to better approximate the ideal type as individuals is limited by the available resources. It also identifies areas of improvement for students' institutions. At the garden, many didn't find individual students fully at fault for being poor volunteers, similar to the reaction of neighbors on their negative impact on Gainesville communities (Rousmaniere 2021). Instead, the university itself holds a responsibility to better train its students on informed, cognizant volunteerism. Universities, especially in college towns, have ample resources that give them hegemony over the cities they reside in (Gumprecht 2008). Some of these financial resources should go towards the further development and strengthening of volunteer resource management capacity initiatives. This is one way that universities can repair the negative impacts they have on local communities in consultation with community partners. Resources that reach the entire body of student volunteers at an institution must be created. Strong value formation specific to causes, such as climate change or homelessness, is less important than a foundation of what it means to be a good volunteer.

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