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### Service Learning Project



The outdoors is my happy place. It always has been, always will be. My six-year-old self used to disappear while playing on the street with my neighbors, only for them to find me at the local park studying the snails that traced the curves of the leaves. My thirteen-year-old self used to search for any excuse to take my dog for a walk around the block, only to stay out for hours while my dog and I would rest under the shade of a large tree on a warm day. Here I am, now at nineteen-years-old, and nothing has changed. I am working toward a career in landscape architecture where I will get the opportunity to design public outdoor spaces in an attempt to allow my passion for being outside to impact others in a positive way. My minor is horticulture will also help further my career as a landscape architect by introducing me to the cultivation of gardens. Needless to say, my affinity for nature is as much a part of me as is the blood that

courses through my body. This project is one of the special times this semester that I was presented with the opportunity to do something that I truly loved for a grade. I chose to volunteer at the Athens Land Trust, which is a local farm that is located a short distance from the heart of the University of Georgia campus.

According to the official Athens Land Trust website, “Athens Land Trust conserves, empowers and sustains communities through responsible and visionary land use” (Athens Land Trust, 2019, p. 1). To me, this means that the Athens Land Trust is a community-oriented organization, in both respects to the community members who work on the farm and the community members who benefit from the products that are grown on the farm. Regardless of different interpretations that people may have regarding the organization’s website slogan, one thing is undeniable: the Athens Land Trust prioritizes people over profit. Seth Nivens, the manager of the Williams farm, gave us a brief explanation of this value before we began our work. Seth stated that the Williams Farm, which is a part of the Athens Land Trust, is a nonprofit organization that is heavily dependent on volunteers. Seth also explained that the vast majority of their revenue is made through the Farm Share service, in which the customer receives at least eight fresh, organic vegetables per week for a downpayment of \$300. The revenue created from this service goes toward payments that are necessary to keep the farm operating. While I fully support the purchase of organic, local food, the Farm Share service raises a few questions for me. Despite the fact that I would relish getting fresh vegetables delivered to my home, I simply cannot afford to spend \$25/week on vegetables as a college student. I know that many of my friends would share the same sentiment as me, as the average college student is perpetually a

little bit broke. I would be curious to see the amount and demographics of the customers who purchased this program.

When I initially stepped onto the land, the first thing that I noticed was the drastic change in environment than what I am accustomed to in Athens. I took a moment to stare out at the five acres (Visit Athens GA, 2019, p.1) of electric green rows of crops. The thing that I noticed the most was the thing that was present the least: the lack of noise, with the exception from the occasional crowing of a bird. It was in this moment that I had been reminded of how long it has been since I have truly been surrounded by nature, not buildings or people. I experienced a feeling of tranquility that I has been absent from my life for quite some time. Seth then gave the four other volunteers and I instructions for the day. We started off by mulching, which is “the process of covering the soil surface around the plants to create congenial conditions for the crop growth” (Textile Value Chain, 2017, p.1). To begin this process, we arranged flattened cardboard boxes in the formation of a triangle near the other crops. I then moistened the boxes with a hose to soften the cardboard before we transported the soil on top of it. We then transported the nutrient rich soil from the back of the farm to the cardboard boxes with wheelbarrows, assembling a thin layer of soil where the crops will eventually be grown. After this process, the group and I moved soil into pots and planted multiple mint plants, ensuring that they were watered and fertilized afterwards. This whole process lasted roughly two hours, and Seth exemplified his appreciation for our teamwork by treating us to some of the freshly grown strawberries from the farm.

I volunteered with four other individuals who were primarily present due to the need to fulfill volunteer hours for their classes. Within this group of volunteers, there were three females

and one male volunteer. This initially surprised me, as I will sadly admit that I have perpetuated the stereotypical idea of farmers being male in my mind. However, I quickly realized how closed-minded this theory was, as any gender is capable of farming. I also took note that all of the volunteers were white. I feel that this may be explained due to the fact that ecology and environmental sciences are white-dominated studies. All of the students who were there were enrolled in classes that relate to the environment: Horticulture 2000 and Geography 1125.

In my opinion, ethnoecology can be utilized to explain the practices of the farm. For example, it seems that this land trust utilizes traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). Traditional ecological knowledge is based on experience, and this experience gives one the knowledge how to properly cultivate the land (Kimmerer, 2002, p.3). This practice can be controversial because it relies on “Indigenous Knowledge” as opposed to traditional scientific empirical data. Although it is possible that the farm utilizes scientific data, I tend to think that the farm is more likely based upon traditional ecological knowledge, as a nonprofit farm likely does not have enough funds for the equipment needs to perform complex calculations. This however seems to work for them, for the farm seems to run efficiently.

I will definitely be returning to the Athens Land Trust in the future. I nearly forgot how incredibly humbling it is to get your hands a little dirty while connecting with the earth. In addition and perhaps more importantly, volunteer work connects people. I ended up becoming friends with these people during our short time together. I learned that one of the volunteers interned at the Athens Land Trust last semester to fulfill a requirement for his horticulture minor- the same minor as mine. I thus will look into following his footsteps and possibly interning at the Athens Land Trust. I also became friends with a sweet girl named Laura, who offered to drive

me back to my dorm to prevent having to take an Uber (as I do not have a car in Athens). In a world that is so divided, it is easy to forget how quickly people can connect when united around a common purpose, like working at the Athens Land Trust.

## Bibliography

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