

Engaging urban youth in sustainable agriculture: A case study of the Real Food Farm internship program

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Research Objectives

We aimed to assess:

1. Which program components promoted participants' engagement in the RFF High School Internship Program?
2. What were the program outcomes from the participants' perspectives, and how did those compare with the target outcomes described by the RFF staff?

Internship Program Structure and Activities

Interns come to the farm for two to three hours two days a week after school and on Saturday mornings. During the week the group spends one afternoon in a classroom setting learning about topics ranging from plant biology and agricultural methods to ecology and food systems. On the other afternoon they assist with farm work and other hands-on activities. Both days begin with preparing and eating a healthy snack from fresh produce, and some time for tending to their "personal plots" where they raise crops of their choice. On Saturday mornings they help to manage and prepare a healthy lunch for the community volunteer day, or sell RFF produce at a stand at a nearby farmer's market.

Methods

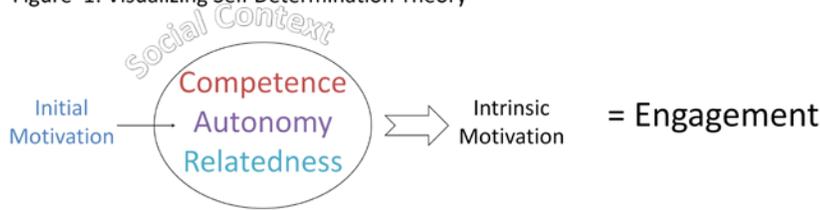
This year-long case study followed a group of six interns, all high school students from low-income areas in Baltimore City, who began the program in the spring or fall of 2012. It consisted of reviewing program documents, observation, a participatory photography project, multiple in-depth interviews with each intern over the course of the program, and interviews with program staff. We transcribed all interviews verbatim and entered them into qualitative analysis software for line-by-line coding. After reading all transcripts, we developed a codebook using Self-Determination Theory as a theoretical framework.

After compiling coded transcript excerpts by topic, we used these in conjunction with our observation notes and the interns' photographs to draw conclusions about which factors promoted participant engagement and what they viewed as the program's outcomes. Drawing on data collected through these various methods allowed us to triangulate our findings, i.e. assess whether information from different sources led to the same conclusions. We then "member-checked" our initial conclusions by presenting them to the interns and RFF education coordinator. They confirmed the major themes we had identified, and we made minor revisions based on their feedback.

Theoretical Framework

Deci & Ryan's Self-Determination Theory^{1,2} guided our research methods and data analysis. Self-Determination Theory identifies engagement in educational and social settings as being linked to learning, achievement, and well-being. Engagement also facilitates integration of behaviors and social values into the psyche. Deci and Ryan state that "engagement is determined by an individual's intrinsic motivation, and is facilitated by the extent to which the social context meets three basic psychological needs: **competence, autonomy & relatedness.**" Fostering an environment that meets these needs can improve program outcomes, ultimately providing greater benefit to the participant.

Figure 1: Visualizing Self Determination Theory



Findings

Engagement

Our analysis suggests several ways that the internship engages participants by meeting their needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Key strategies include

providing interns with their own plots of land to cultivate, involving interns in teaching lessons on farm skills and biology to younger students and others in the community, and giving interns increasing responsibility for directing community volunteer days. The fact that it was a paid internship, and that it gave participants an opportunity to be active and outside were important sources of initial motivation. Figure 2 displays how these internship components map onto those specified by Self Determination Theory.

Figure 2: How the RFF internship program meets Self-Determination Theory requirements for promoting engagement



Table 1: Success in meeting RFF target outcomes assessed through intern comments

	Described by All Interns	Described by Some Interns	Described by Few or None
Food & Nutrition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trying new fruits and vegetables Knowledge of food justice issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improvements in diet over the course of the internship Commitment to eating a healthy diet in the future 	
Environmental Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased ecological and biological knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding the importance of urban agriculture Knowledge of how sustainable farming practices differ from standard agricultural practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accurate understanding of "food miles"
Job/Life Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater comfort speaking in public Improved knowledge of farm skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of skills relevant to future desired career Links to job opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Desire for a career in food or agriculture work
Personal Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sense of confidence and pride Exposure to new experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Desire to improve the community Commitment to being an "agent of change" 	

¹Deci, Edward L., and Richard M. Ryan. "The" what" and" why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior." *Psychological inquiry* 11.4 (2000): 227-268.

²Deci, Edward L., and Richard M. Ryan. *Self-Determination*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1985.